

Disclaimer – I don't own Harry Potter and probably never will. On with the show...

Thursday June 9th, 1994

Chapter 1 – A House of Cards

It all started after I drove off the Dementors by the lake. At first, it was a mild buzzing in the head. Later, I would be able to say it felt similar to euphoria or drunkenness. All too soon it became a raging migraine. At the time, I had no frame of reference. I'd be lying if I said I could truly recall the details of the night. Though, the trip on Buckbeak's back with Hermione screaming in my ears all the way stood out.

Healthy set of lungs on that girl. I can testify to that, if necessary. You might have to speak up if you want to ask me.

An hour later, Sirius had disappeared on the back of the hippogriff and I was spending the night in the infirmary with Hermione and Ron. Sirius did a number on Ron's leg. It reminded me of something. Ever have that sense of Déjà vu? Irony coming from a bloke that just finished traveling through time using a bauble on a necklace? I sure did. I managed to convince Madame Pomfrey to give me something for the throbbing headache and tried to get some sleep.

"Harry, are you asleep yet?" Hermione's voice came from the next bed over.

"Yes, and dreaming as well." There let her figure that out.

"Prat! What do you think is going to happen?"

"Don't rightly know. Sirius will have to stay on the run. At least Dumbledore might have some resources to help him. I should have let them kill Pettigrew. Of course, with my luck Remus would have ended up eating the evidence."

"Disgusting! Don't say that, Harry! You did the right thing." For such a bright girl, Hermione Granger can be so naïve. Hindsight is a damn

sight better than my vision and I'm pretty sure that a dead Peter Pettigrew wouldn't have escaped from anyone.

"So, I never asked you how you did on the Professor Lupin's obstacle course? How are you taking the other exams for your extra classes?" I didn't really need to know, but I'll let you in on a secret – Hermione's voice has a melodic droning quality that is rather nice to fall asleep to.

If I thought the headaches were bad, the dreams were worse. I was used to cold, clammy night terrors. Getting locked in the cupboard had really helped that along. At first, I chalked it up to hanging out with a large number of Dementors, not exactly a lively group. It might sound like blasphemy, but maybe eating a large quantity of chocolate just before going to bed isn't such a good idea? After waking Hermione and Ron up the second time, I dropped a silencing spell over my bed. It was one of the worst nights of sleep in my brief, but eventful life.

In the morning's light, the so-called 'golden trio' looked a bit tarnished. Ron hobbled along with a cane. Hermione actually has to spend about twenty minutes on her hair to make it look more like a head of hair and less like a Herbology experiment gone awry. She's a great friend, but there are some things even magic can't fix. Me, I don't even bother with the hair and resemble death warmed over. The big bags under my eyes made me wonder if I was actually a raccoon Animagus trapped in mid-transformation. There are aches in parts of my body that shouldn't exist on a thirteen year old.

Absently, I stuck my wand in my mouth and mutter, "integrum restituere." My breath freshened and my teeth were cleaned. 'Breakfast here I come.' It would be a few days before I realized that no one had ever taught Harry James Potter that particular spell. Thankfully, ignorance was actually bliss as I wasn't ready for a nervous breakdown just yet.

At breakfast, we learned that the Minister has removed the Dementors from the school grounds. The three of us were subjected to numerous stares from the rest of the Gryffs and even some of the Puffs and Claws. The rumors that we were in the infirmary all night

had already started to spread. The fact we looked like hell probably didn't escape them either.

I had to love my friends. Ron was so bloody oblivious – it's beautiful. Ragnarok could come and if the silly plonker was eating, he wouldn't notice. Hermione was so used to being an outsider that she couldn't really give a crap. Though, I suspected that when she decides to start trying to attract blokes that'll change. Ginny, Fred, George and Percy were interrogating Ron about his injury. His mum's howler wasn't due for at least twenty minutes. We stuck to our story that a critter near Hagrid's hut had come out of the forest and bit Ron. The big guy even made a point of swinging by the table and telling Ron that he chased the wild kneazle into the woods, but couldn't catch him – subtle, very subtle. Amused that I could think of Hagrid and the word 'subtle' at the same time, I almost missed the idiot heading towards our table.

'Oh goody! The boil on the arse of life is coming over. Just what I needed to start the day.'

"What do you want Malfoy?" It had to be something good, he's got Parkinson with him along with the usual crowd. I considered the possibility that he wasn't going to end up a queer after all? I discarded it for lack of concern on my part a moment later.

The little blonde haired ponce sneered at me. I have yet to find a good tutor for mastering such a sneer. "Just coming over to see if you heard the news about that creature Lupin resigning. Maybe the oaf, Hagrid can put him in a cage and we can study him next year."

"Ten points from Slytherin for disrespecting a teacher! I'll let the teachers decide if you can still go to Hogsmeade today." Draco was slipping. He didn't even notice Percy was still circling. The 'red headed tyrant' had just over a week left in his 'reign of terror' and was probably looking to make the most of it.

"Lupin resigned. I'm not disrespecting that creature." His smug look turned on the head boy.

"I believe you called Professor Hagrid an 'oaf', another five points for arguing with the head boy. Lets see, if I take you to Professor Snape,

he'll reverse it. If I go to Professor McGonagall, your head of house will claim bias. So let's go to a neutral party."

I watched as Percy leads Malfoy over to none other than Hagrid. Percy had a mean streak doesn't he? Still does from what I hear. Oh look, Snape rushed to his pretty boy's defense, breakfast and a show – not too shabby. Still, he said Remus resigned. I felt compelled to investigate. Hermione was already begging off to go clean herself up. She said goodbye and headed for the tower with Ginny in tow. Ron dictated a shopping list to the twins, milking his injury for what it is worth. I excused myself and head for Professor Lupin's classroom.

Remus treated me to a butterbeer at the Hogs Head. Most everyone else favored the Three Broomsticks, which is exactly why he picked here. It was nice to have the Marauder's Map back. Technically, I wasn't supposed to be in Hogsmeade, but in all the confusion amongst the staff with the events of last night, practical OWL and NEWT exams still to be given. I simply walked out with the rest of the sheep and no one was the wiser. Though several glared at the Werewolf walking next to me on the way into town. After two additional butterbeers and a few stories about my parents and Padfoot's antics, the conversation drew to a close. Remus is such a good storyteller that it felt like I was actually there! I followed him outside towards the egress apparition point.

"Will you seek him out?"

"In time, Harry, all in good time. I'll probably be traveling a good bit this summer, but I'll try to send you an owl at some point."

"Thank you, sir." I extended my hand. He took it with a firm grip.

"Please, call me Remus or if you want, Mooney."

"Take care of yourself, Mooney." It felt strange, but right addressing him like that.

He disappeared with a slight crack and I headed back up the path towards the school. There was no sense in pressing my luck, plus the headache was back in full force. Instead of heading straight to the dorms for a nap, I dropped by the pitch and grabbed my Firebolt. Maybe the air would clear my head. A few shapes were up there. Someone was playing a bit of Quidditch. Not surprisingly, it was Wood in the rings. He'd been frantic ever since Puddlemere sent him the offer letter. His tryout was in two weeks. He probably should've been preparing for his NEWT practicals, but if I had a shot at the big time, I'd probably have been doing the same thing! I debated mentioning it to Hermione and watching her spin herself up. Katie Bell and her friend Leanne Patterson were taking runs at him. Like us ickle third years, the fourth years were done with their exams as well.

"Oy, Ollie! Shouldn't you cramming for your NEWTs?"

He laughed and gave a one-fingered salute. "Got it covered, Harry. This is way more important! Katie, give the boy wonder the Quaffle. Come on Harry take a few runs at me on that Firebolt of yours. Two of the three starters on Puddlemere have them." I arced lazily towards Katie and accelerated.

"Shouldn't you be enjoying yourself in Hogsmeade?" I yelled to the curly blonde as she hurled the Quaffle. I one handed it and turned on the afterburners, barely hearing her happy scream of "Free Tickets! Why else?" Ollie favored his right side ever so slightly, so he tended to stay towards the left side of the hoop he was protecting. Needing to release before I hit the shooter's arc, I charge hard and deked high and to the left and released trying to go top-shelf on him. It made it over the tips of his outstretched gloves and watched the Quaffle sail through the hoop. Potter One, Wood Nada.

Ollie looked confused, angry and appreciative at the same time as he fetched the ball from the ground and brought it back. "Holy House Elf Balls, Harry! You've been holding out on me. I'll make you a deal. You keep working with me for the next week and I won't tell Angie. If I tell her you can do that, she's liable to move Katie or Alicia to seeker next season.

I headed back towards the whooping Katie. “C’mon Bell, I’ll bring it in and feed you. Go low side ring three. Let’s make him move a bit! Ollie! Two on null break coming your way! Stop us if you can!” Chasing is a bit more restrictive than being a seeker. The passers arc is twenty-meter circle surrounding the three hoops. Once inside it, you can’t pass to another player. At ten meters is the shooter’s arc. Whoever has the Quaffle has to take the shot before they cross that line. The keeper has those split seconds to figure out which of the three hoops you’re going for and make their move.

I did a number of shimmies and feints to keep the Firebolt moving at near top speed, but still allow Katie’s Comet 375 to stay near. I eyed rings one and two pretty blatantly and did a ‘no look dump pass’ to Katiebear and veered away. She put the biscuit in the bucket cackling with glee as Ollie went to fetch the Quaffle again. The unspoken rule of practice was if the keeper blocks it, the shooter plays fetch. If the chaser scores, then the keeper has to go get it.

Katie did a bit of a victory roll coming back wagging on her broom a bit. It was a nice waggle. “Ollie’s right. You’ve been holding back on us. I’m not sure Angie could have pulled that one off. Should I start figuring out how to catch a snitch?”

Still feeling a bit giddy I replied, “No worries there, Sky Princess. I’m still a seeker last I checked. We can’t break up the ‘flying foxes’, if you know what I mean?” She was bit gobsmacked at me actually flirting. Hell, if I’d been thinking about it, I’d have been pretty shocked as well!

Ollie didn’t look pleased, “Bloody hell, Harry! Remind me, which one of us has a pro tryout in two weeks? After fifth year you should try to make the spring developmental squads!” Most new players spend their first two or three years in the spring leagues. Ollie and one of the Claw beaters managed to get permission to leave school briefly to participate.

“Nah, straight to the pros for me,” I quipped in answer to him catching the Quaffle and hauling twig back to the centerline leaving both of them sucking my draft. “Okay Ollie! You look like you need some help back there. Katie is your defender. Ready Leanne?” The willowy

brunette nodded riding a Cleansweep Eight that looked like Alicia's broom. "Katie will be after me. She'll expect me to take the shot. I'll pitch it to you highside ring one. If you have the shot take it. If not circle clockwise and hit me highside ring two. I'll be on the backside."

They stopped it, but only because Leanne botched the give and go. The look on Ollie's face says that he knew he would have been beat on the backside of ring two.

Thirty minutes later, the four of us were soaked with sweat. Both Ollie and Katie swore up and down that I had suddenly turned into some kind of chaser-possessed demon. I got a smack on the arm when I offered to shower in the girl's locker room so the two girls could inspect me for my bat wings. Wood wanted me back on the pitch everyday and thanked me for giving him a workout as hard as he had gotten in the spring leagues. I appreciated the offer of free tickets just the same.

That night the dreams were worse. I hoped that exhausting myself out on the pitch would help. It didn't. Waking up in a cold sweat wasn't a good thing. I ended up dragging my sorry arse to the shower at five in the morning. At least it was Saturday. I passed by some of the desperate seventh years on the chopping block for Monday's exams. Brenda Thorton was damn near desperate looking at three scrolls of Runes in front of her.

"The ruddy thing doesn't make any sense! I'm losing my mind. I can't find the effing problem!"

For the sake of being curious, I peered around always enjoying a good train wreck. Scanning the parchment and her translation – Old Celtic. I pointed at the top third of the parchment. "There, those two symbols. They aren't 'unity and pride', when used with each other. Together, they mean 'strength of heart'. Try getting some rest. You seem a bit strung out."

The seventh year stared at me for a moment before realizing that I was right. She gave me a thankful smile - before abandoning my

advice and pulling another translation sheet out of her packet. It wasn't until I was halfway out in the hallway as I was thinking about how that combination tripped me up once, when I realized that I had never taken Ancient Runes.

That was the moment I first realized that I was in trouble.

Author's Notes - Thanks for reading. This story is being done without a beta or assistance from my usual folks as part of a little contest between myself and an author on Darklordpotter. So, any mistakes and plot holes are mine. Inform me and I will edit it when the contest is over. I figured that I have done 3rd person and 2nd person, so how about I give 1st person a whack. I'd like to thank Draco664 for writing some of the best 1st person I've seen so far. I hope I can come close.
Jim

Disclaimer – This is a work of fan fiction done for entertainment purposes only.

Acknowledgements – I'd like to thank everyone for the massive reception this new story has seen. FF(dot)net has 68 reviews and FFA(dot)net has 138. As I mentioned, since this is a competition entry, I have no beta for this one. So, all the mistakes are mine. Chapter 1 was supposed to be a prologue told in the past tense. Apparently, that didn't go so well. This chapter and all future chapters are in the present tense (hopefully).

Sunday June 12th, 1994

Chapter 2 – Flawed Assumptions

So, yeah that's me. I'm the boy hero wandering around in a fog with all this crazy shit going through my head. Today, I have been generally trying to avoid people. I briefly considered going back to the infirmary, which is something given my legendary hatred of that place! I mentioned to Hermione that I'd be spending the day with Ron and I told Ron that I'd stay with Hermione to help her prepare for the 'library withdrawal' that everyone knows is coming.

I wonder if this is what it was like to go insane. There are some magical curses so intense that prolonged exposure can make a person go off the deep end. Maybe that's happening to me? I keep seeing flashes of things. Maybe, I'm a Seer and I'm seeing things that will be? Is that how I knew the answer to Brenda's rune translation? Sure! Why the heck not? In the future, I must learn Old Celtic and that's why I could answer that question?

Divination has always been, well to put it bluntly, a joke. I've never really put much into it, but who am I to question what gifts I am given? Hey, I can stop making up my homework! It'll probably be a bit more useful than, let's say the whole talking to snakes thing. Though, it's a good guess that if this gets out, the whispers and the pointing would start again. Ah, the good times, I should have known the first night I got here. I love it when people point and whisper. It's the attention whore in me!

I can just see me now, setting up a table in the middle of Hogsmeade with my crystal ball waiting for people to come and toss me a couple of knuts to read the tea leaves or throw the bones for them. How much would that little wanker Malfoy enjoy seeing that? No, this won't do at all! My first foray into predicting the future appears to be an unmitigated disaster.

I need some help, but who to ask? How about the crazy bitch herself? Yeah, that's a conversation I'd want to have with dear old Sybil. Hell, the funny part is that she has a real gift, but she has no control over it whatsoever. Maybe I could go to Dumbledore? No, my head hurts enough without all his riddles and doubletalk. How about Professor M? Oh that would be rich, going to her to talk about the possibility of being a Seer. She'd be real supportive of that! Might as well make it a double header and ask her to give you the talk about where little witches and wizards come from. I'd get a better opinion if I just go to Snivellus with my problems. At least when he takes points from me, I could say 'I knew you were going to do that!' Recalling Sirius mock him about his chemistry set brings a smile to my face.

After a bit more wandering, I realize that I'm starving and lunch just finished. Why not a quick stroll down to the kitchens for a bite to eat? Watching the chaos of dozens of house elves all going about their merry way, as I descend the steps, is pretty humorous. One elf sees me and immediately stops what he is doing. Oh shit! Not him! Anyone but him!

"Harry Potter is coming to see Dobby!" Even the other elves look at him kind of sideways. It's kind of sad that I never really thought to ask what happened to him. Then again, he did injure me to 'help' me. I don't think many people would fault me for not pursuing a close, personal friendship with a mentally unstable critter like him.

"Err, how are you Dobby?"

"Dobby is great. Dobby is happy to be seeing the great and powerful Harry Potter!" I smiled a bit wondering where he had been, when we had snuck down here for some food. Shit! When have I ever snuck down here and gotten food? The answer is I hadn't! For that matter, how did I know the way to get into the kitchens in the first place? I'd

heard Fred and George talking about it, but I don't think I've ever been here before.

"I've never been down here before, have I?"

"Mr. Albus Dumbledore asks Dobby not to seek out Harry Potter, so Dobby hoped that Mr. Harry Potter come to see Dobby."

I guess I haven't been here 'yet'. Maybe it's my new 'Seer' thing happening again. "Why did Dumbledore not want you to come see me?"

"He tells Dobby that the Great Harry Potter might not want Dobby's help right now." I silently added, 'and he would be right.'

"When did he tell you this?" I've already started to see that the man always tries to keep people guessing.

"He tells Dobby this day after you freed Dobby from bad master. Dobby had nowhere to go so the Great Mr. Albus Dumbledore gives Dobby a job."

"Did he ever remind you not to come near me?"

"No, Headmaster too busy to speak to poor Dobby. Every month 1 galleon appears on Dobby's mattress so Dobby is getting paid!" Okay, I can let my suspicions go, this time. Dumbledore's actions seem pretty reasonable. Though the fact that I am suspicious of him makes me wonder how he will treat me in the future. All this crap is making my head hurt.

"Why did you want to speak with me Dobby?"

"Dobby wants to become Harry Potter's personal elf!"

"Personal elf as in bonded to me?"

"Yes! Dobby can think of no greater way to repay the Great and Wonderful Mr. Harry Potter for freeing him."

Now that's a bit of logic to try and wrap my mind around. "So, let me get this straight? You want to thank me for freeing you by enslaving yourself to me?" I see his eyes start bulging and he looks like he wants to pee or something – not very good signs. I began to fear that he'd start humping my leg like one of Aunt Marge's dogs did when I was six.

So these are my options; first and foremost, Dobby is a lunatic. I can assume that he's a bit dodgy even by House Elf standards. He could make a mess of things by just trying to help me? Then again, when I'm at my Aunts, it might be worth the laugh. I could always give him clothes and free him, if he got out of control. Moony always says that I have a way of 'working things to my advantage.' Wait a damn second! When did, or is it does, he say that? Maybe this is where that saying starts. Man, being a Seer is weird? Okay, I better give the psycho an answer.

"Dobby, I don't know if I'm ready for my own personal elf just yet. Let's try this. How about I hire you for the summer? You can work for me on a trial basis. We could consider making it permanent at some point after we make certain that you like working for me?" Those chores are getting rather bothersome. Now that I'm getting older, Vernon will probably start trying to make me do all that rubbish that he's been too cheap to hire a handyman for. I picture myself with a plunger in my hands because Dudley's massive bowel movements have clogged up the crapper, again. Yeah, that sounds more up Dobby's alley than mine. They say good help is hard to find. From my past experiences, I say that any help is hard to find. There's always some spell induced cave-in or some other idiotic reason that I end up alone and fighting for my life. Well, I had Hermione with me last time things got stupid, so maybe things are getting better?

At first, when he thinks I'm rejecting him, he looks crestfallen. Then he hugs my leg as soon as I mention 'consider making it permanent'. I look at the other elves and they at me. I'd almost swear their eyes are either saying 'good luck' to me or 'good riddance' to Dobby. At least he isn't humping, yet.

"Dobby, I still live with my muggle relatives. We have to establish some ground rules. They can't see you. You can't talk to them. If they

find out about you, they'll make me send you away. Can you still do your work and stay out of sight?"

"Oh yes! Dobby can do that! Dobby is good at hiding. When Mr. Harry Potter's relatives are around, they will not see Dobby."

"Good. Good. Now, my relatives don't like me very much, they will say things about me that are not nice...."

"They must not say bad things about the Great Mr. Harry Potter!"

This may be harder than I originally thought. "Dobby, you have to let them say things about me. Otherwise they find out about you and I have to get rid of you. Can you do that?"

He is unhappy, but nods slowly. "Okay, consider yourself hired, when the summer starts. Now could you get me something to eat? I missed lunch." Like a living missile the elf bolts into the kitchen and begins throwing something together. I sit down at a smallish table and tried to focus on these new powers. Do I have visions of me owning an elf? I think I do. I recall the elf being less frantic. Perhaps the crazy bugger will mellow with time? Makes me wonder if there are potions that can be given to him to make him a tad less psychotic?

Two minutes later no less than five sandwiches and three types of juice are in front of me. Fanatical little zealot isn't he? I rub my forehead with my palm.

"Is Mr. Harry Potter's head hurting? Dobby could go get a pain potion?" I nodded absently and he pops away as I start in on the roast beef and mustard sandwich. It's rather good. I'm on my second sandwich, Ham and Swiss, as if anyone actually cared, when he gets back with the potion. One chugged potion later and I can think a bit clearer. I really need to get my head examined. Madame Pomfrey is great for cuts, bumps, bruises and the occasional hexing, but I think that mental examinations were just a bit out of her league. I know the perfect person, err thing – The Sorting Hat!

“Dobby, could you go and bring me the Sorting Hat from the Headmaster’s office?” The elf looks hesitant. Several others look on as well. “Is something wrong?”

“House Elves not supposed to take anything from Headmaster’s office without Mr. Albus Dumbledore’s permission. Why does the Great Harry Potter want to speak with nasty old piece of cloth?” Dumbledore wasn’t at breakfast this morning. He might be off the school grounds. This couldn’t wait! I need to know now!

“I just need to speak with it and then you can return it. I’m not interested in stealing it. I just need to ask it some questions.”

Dobby accepts that and disappears. He returns a minute later empty-handed. “Nasty Hat says it doesn’t want to come. Says to Dobby, ‘Ask the brat, why I should come?’ Dobby will take answer to nasty Hat.”

Damn sight less helpful then the last time! “Ask the Hat if it has anything else to do right now other than sit on a shelf for the next three months?”

Dobby disappears again and returns. Again, he has no Hat. This is getting old. “Nasty evil Hat calls both Dobby and Mr. Harry Potter several names that Dobby does not wish to repeat in front of his Master. Nasty Hat says Mr. Harry Potter should come to it, if he really wants to talk.”

I start thinking up a clever reply; one involving what I could conceivably do to that old rag when a ball of fire appears right in front of me. Fawkes is hovering just above me with the Hat in its beak.

“Take me back this instant! You sodding, idiot bird!” Instead, Fawkes drops the Hat onto your plate making certain that it lands on a dollop of mustard that had fallen from the first sandwich. The Hat is pretty irate now. I’d swear that the phoenix winks at me as it disappears. The Hat’s near endless stream of vulgarities makes me wonder, what eleven year old minds it pulled those words out of.

“Get this off of me this instant, you ignorant shit for brain!” One of the rumors that Petunia spread throughout the neighborhood was that I had something called Tourette’s syndrome. Once I found out what it was, I had half a mind to start doing it in public just to get back at her.

“Hey, I just want to talk. No need to be an arse.” I say picking it up and wiping the mustard off.

“Why in the name of Salazar’s left nut do you think I would want to speak with you?”

“Maybe, because I asked...” The throbbing in my temple is starting again. This isn’t helping.

“How about I ask you to go take a leap of the bloody Astronomy Tower?”

“Hey! I’ve got an idea. How about I flip you over and pinch a loaf right where I pulled the sword out of? Would that improve your shitty attitude?”

“Listen you fucking little twit! I’ve got two jobs and that’s it! Sing a fucking song and tell a bunch of snot nosed, bed wetting, miserable excuses for what didn’t run down their mother’s legs what house they would suck the least in!”

Words fail me for a moment. Even Snape isn’t this much of a bloody wanker! “Merlin’s balls, what is your damn problem?”

“You want to know what my problem is Potter! Two hundred years since I’ve been out of this fucking castle! Fifty more years before I get off of fucking probation.”

“What did you do?” Must have been impressive to get a quarter millennia of detention, it sounds like one for the books.

“Traumatized some little tit-sucker by revealing that the current Dark Lord of the time was the bastard’s illegitimate father. The spineless shit offered himself that night! You know the saying don’t blame the messenger. It doesn’t mean a fucking thing! When you came in

peeing and moaning about being the heir of Slytherin, I threw you a bone hoping that Dumbledore would give me some time off for good behavior. You know what that anal retentive, bed wetting past the age of nine, lemon drop sucking nancy boy said to me? 'Why Hat? Good behavior is its own reward.' Oh, I've got a song to sing when the reaper finally catches up with that worthless bag of ass spackle!"

Well, that's definitely something new, "How about we make a deal. You help me out and I put in a good word with the Headmaster? Does that seem fair?"

"What makes you think you have any pull, other than when you're wanking you little pecker and screaming Granger's name?"

I let the cheap shot slide. Now if he had said Cho Chang that would be another story. "He seems pretty interested in my life as opposed to your average third year student. I'll talk to him. He owes me. I'm the boy hero. Fuck, I don't know. I'll find a damn way to get you out of this castle for a while! Are you in or out?"

The wretched thing actually makes me wait a minute before answering, "I'm in Potter, but I warn you. If you screw me over, I will skullfuck the living shit out of every piece of left over sperm your family ever sends to this school."

I'm a teenager. By now, I've heard just about every bad word or expression, but there is something deeply wrong with that hat. Maybe, I should just go to Poppy and let her fret over me like she really wants to? Nah, I've come too far now. "Fine, I need you to look into my head. I've been seeing stuff lately. I helped a girl out with Runes, when I've never even opened a book. I gave Wood a fit playing Chaser against him. I've never even come close before. I think I'm a Seer and seeing the future. I figure you're the best one for looking around in someone's head."

"Fine Potter, let's get this over with."

"This doesn't get out, not even to the Headmaster."

“Like I’d tell the toothless cocksucker! I’d rather watch the dust cloud as he and McGonagall try and prove they can still do it.”

“I did not need to hear that crap!” Who needs that image running around in their mind?

“Doesn’t matter much to me what you think you stupid fuck! Go ahead and put me on! I haven’t done this in a long time, so it’s bound to hurt a bit.”

I put the hat on my head, “You do it every year to about thirty kids.”

The voice speaking in my head replies, “No. When I am on someone’s head, I whisper to their subconscious. I say words like courage and bravery and see what images the mind shows. I move on to loyalty, hard work, wit, intelligence, ambition and cunning. Whichever images strike me as the most provoking is how I make my decision. What you are asking for is a deep examination of your thoughts. It will hurt a bit, but you’re no stranger to pain are you?”

I agree and the Hat starts torturing me. Want to know what I am feeling at this moment? Grab a hunk of hair and yank. That’s what I’m feeling right now.

“Interesting, very interesting, here boy follow me down into your mind.”

I try to follow feeling like I have been drawn into the vortex. “Your thoughts are scattered boy. Try learning some fucking Occlumency at some point. Eleven year olds are much easier to read. See this fog. It’s your memories. Call a memory up and picture Dumbledore or anyone else. See there is the image forming in the mist. Now look over here.”

I feel the tug, as I am pulled deeper into my memories. The fog darkens into blackness with only tiny bits of light. “This is different. This area is something you’ve been repressing and hiding from yourself. The edges are getting lighter meaning, whatever it is the barriers are falling. Move to that area just at the edge and try and see the memory that’s there. I don’t have all damn day, you little pussy!”

I'm scared. I'm not afraid to admit it. Who likes being told that there are things you're hiding? Was Vernon playing diddle the nephew? Shit! Was Dudders? Whatever it was, it wasn't going to remain a secret forever. I stuck my hand into the mist and felt the memory. I was flying during a game. We're playing Ravenclaw. I toss a crossing pass to a seventh year and go low towards the deck. I pulled hard on the Comet I was riding and go vertical right at the shooter's arc. The other chaser hit me with the Quaffle right where we practiced it and I take the shot. It goes under the keeper's broom and through ring two.

"Nice shot, Potter!" The red headed chaser called out to me.

"Bloody good pass, Frank, let's pile on the points and hope that Collingsworth can catch the snitch! We need to win this one by at least eighty!"

"Don't worry about my Alice. She'll get it!"

I hear myself reply as the memory fades away.

"I'm not a Chaser and who the bloody hell is Frank!"

"I recognize him. He was in Dumbledore's office enough. He's Frank Longbottom. His son is in your year. That memory wasn't yours boy. That belonged to your father."

"How are my father's memories in my head?" I scream.

"Maybe the question you should be asking is, 'How are my memories in my son's body?' There's a lot more darkness than there is light in this part of your memories. Seems to me that Lily left her protection on her son's body and Voldemort transferred his ability to speak to serpents. Is it possible that James Potter left something as well? Hell boy, Harry Potter might have died that night and you've been living as him ever since, eh James? Snape's always at Dumbledore's desk bitching that you're just like you damn father. Maybe the greasy butt-pumper is spot on!" The Hat laughs at me in a mocking tone.

I don't respond very well to that at all. I rip the hat off my head and scream my bloody lungs out. House elves scatter to the four winds. It's not possible. I'm not my father! I'm Harry! The map, the map never lies! I pull it out from my robes and spread it out. It takes only a moment to activate it and find myself in the kitchen.

I watch the words on the page - Harry Potter. They morph into James Potter right before my eyes. No! It turns back to Harry Potter and starts going back and forth between the two. No! No! No! After a minute, it stops leaving Harry James Potter there. The map doesn't display middle names. We didn't make it that way. Damn it to hell! The Marauders didn't make it that way!

I'm guessing I fainted. Mainly because, I'm on the ground and from the looks of things Dobby just dumped a pitcher of juice on my face. I'm sputtering liquid out of my mouth and nose gasping for breath, while the Hat is just there laughing at the whole thing. I should reconsider this whole thing with Dobby, seriously the creature just tried to drown me! I struggle to my feet.

"Going to scream and faint like a little girl again, douchebag?" I should have Dobby kill the hat. Yeah that's a good idea!

I make sure to cough really hard and send a nice juicy phlegm projectile right at it. Still gagging, I manage, "No. I'm good."

"Good. The next thing the elf will probably grab is hot soup. As much as I'd like to see that, we have a deal Potter. Should I call you Harry or James?"

"Harry, you fucking scrap of cloth! I'm Harry Potter."

The hat harrumphed. "That seems to be the question of the day. Glad you are so certain."

With a quick spell my face and clothes are cleaned of all the juice on them. I wipe my lung butter off the hat. "Since you're such an expert, where do you think I should go from here?"

“I’m a hat not a wretched healer. You could obliviate yourself. That worked real well for that charlatan Lockhart, or you could deal with it. All those memories are going to come back to the surface, whether you want them to or not. Now that you’re conscious of what’s going on, it’ll probably start happening faster.”

I don’t have a smart answer for that. “You’re right. I can probably brew some memory potions to speed the process up. That Occulmency thing you mentioned. It sounds familiar. I can probably use that too.”

“Good. There’s some hope for you yet boy. Don’t whine about the shit you can’t change, instead focus on doing something constructive. Now, send me back to my prison and come up with a good lie to get me out and about.”

I nod to Dobby and he disappears with the Hat. I am so stunned that I almost left the Map down in the kitchen. I wander towards the library. There are some medical texts there. I’ll look up the magical treatment for amnesia. That’s a start.

I enlist Hermione’s help by telling her that I am curious about how they might have tried to treat Lockhart. It turns out that Occlumency would actually hinder rather than help me. The recommended treatment is a Draught of Openness to remove protective barriers in the mind, followed by the Elixir of Recollection to assist in recovering the missing memories and finished with a Draught of Peace to help the patient relax and not panic. None of the recipes look that difficult. The Draught of Peace is so common that I can probably send Dobby to one of the Apothecaries in Diagon Alley to buy in bulk. They won’t sell memory potions to students because of the stupid notion that we honorable students wouldn’t use them to cheat our little magical arses off. Like I haven’t seen a seventh year coming back from Hogsmeade with a vial or two! I’ll have to brew that one or hire someone to brew it for me. Same goes for the first one. Dobby will have to go get the reagents from different stores as it would probably raise all kinds of alarms, if he bought it all at the same store. I could

probably raid Snape's storeroom, but what the hell for? I've got the money! That's one less thing that could go wrong.

I swing back by the kitchens and give Dobby his shopping list. I tell him to take my vault key and explain that he needs to buy only a couple of ingredients in each location. I had to tell him three separate times not to buy it all in one place. I can brew all this at #4, but I'll offer to paint the garage this year. It should keep them out for the week that I will need to brew all this rubbish! I've got the start to a plan. Now I just need to convince Dumbledore to let me bring the Hat along.

"Well, hello Harry what can I do for you?" The old man says to me.

"Sir, I was wondering if I could ask a favor?"

"You can always ask. If it is in my power to grant, I will be happy to assist."

His doublespeak really annoys me, now. Back before all this, he seemed so knowledgeable and worldly. Now, he's just irritating. "I wanted to study magical history and objects. Would it be possible for me to borrow the Sorting Hat? I want to study it this summer and perhaps write a paper for Professor Binns." It sounds like the kind of stunt Hermione would do, but maybe he'll buy it? I shuffle my feet a little and do the 'aw shucks' routine.

He looks skeptical. "I don't know if the Hat would be a suitable subject for study, Harry. Perhaps you could select something else? I have many items. Minerva is always telling me that I have too many items."

"Well, I'm already familiar with the Hat, sir. I thought it remarkable that the sword of Gryffindor could be contained within a magically enlarged space. Plus since it talks, I was hoping for some company this summer."

"Yes, I see. However, the Hat is not a very social object. It has a rather angry personality."

"I heard that you decaying worm."

I looked at the Hat, who was clearly not helping! "Well let's ask it. Hat, I was hoping to do a bit of research on you this summer. Will it interfere with next year's song if you were to come with me?"

"Not in the least, boy."

"No, Harry I'm afraid I can not allow this. Our Hat is still under a penalty for a past transgression."

Adding a slight whine to my voice, similar to the one Ron uses when he wants chocolate I kept going, "But Headmaster, the Hat sorts so many of us that are raised in the Muggle World, it's out of touch with us. It should see what the world outside of the Magical World is like. Otherwise, how will it understand enough to know how to properly place future students?"

I rehearsed that little speech all afternoon. It is the best argument that I could come up with. I think it is working.

"The Hat has behavior issues."

"I can behave just fine, Dumbledore. I choose not to. The boy has something you never will."

"And what, pray do tell, is that?"

"I respect the boy. I watched him fight Salazar's pet. He's a hero not a lemon drop sucking fossil cashing in on his past glory."

I have to admit the Hat is a harsh bastard. Dumbledore is giving it his best stern look. "I see. Harry, the Dursleys have not proven very receptive of magic and magical items."

"Oh I solved that, sir. I hired Dobby. I'll loan him to the school, when we're back in session."

“Dobby, oh yes, he is the free elf down in the kitchens. As I recall, he wants to pledge himself to you. I’ve heard he’s a bit excitable.”

“Ah, yes he is. We’ve already addressed how he needs to stay out of sight and for the moment; I am only hiring him on a trial basis.”

“How would you go about examining the Hat?”

“I would like to check out few books on enchanting objects from the library – The Theory Behind Enchanting and The Art of Creation.”

“That still doesn’t explain how you will cast the necessary diagnostic charms without incurring Madame Hopkirk’s wrath.”

I did the guilty look. “Well, uh, it’s sort of like this. Dobby says he can prevent weak spells from being detected, just like he made it look like I did the spell to get me in trouble. I tried out a couple of the basic detection spells and he said he could mask them.”

Dumbledore gives me a scolding look and then that little twinkle pops up in his eyes. “I certainly cannot condone such mischief, officially. You do realize, Harry that there are limits to what a House Elf can do? You will need to be careful and restrict your activities.”

I bob my head up and down mimicking Dobby, “Of course, sir! Dobby is going to pick up some ward stones with a silencing charm on them so my relatives won’t hear me and the Hat talking.”

“Yes, those all sound like prudent precautions. It warms my heart to see you taking such an interest in the art of Enchanting. You might even want to mention it to Professor Flitwick. He is quite passionate about the field. Have your elf fetch the Hat after the leaving feast.”

I walk out of his office smiling and pat the Gargoyle on the side as I pass it. ‘Mission Accomplished!’

A few days later, I’m on the train heading back to purgatory. Ron’s going on about no homework for the summer. Hermione raises her

eyes from her book to remind him of the summer assignments. She'll probably have them done by the weekend. I neglect to mention my 'summer companions' to my friends, both Dobby and the Hat should be waiting at #4, when I get there. One wouldn't understand and the other probably wouldn't either, but she'd demand an explanation. She wouldn't be alone. I'm still waiting for one as well.

"Feeling okay, Harry?"

"I suppose, Hermione. I haven't seen the Dursleys since I turned my whale of an Aunt into the bag of hot air she really is. I'm just wondering what this summer is going to be like." It's a bit of a lie, well maybe it's more of a stretch of the truth, but the 'truth' would get everyone involved in my business. Whoever I am, I'm a private person. That much is certain. This summer I have to figure out who or what the fuck I really am. I've got a Hat, an Owl, and an Elf. It's not much and the Elf is going to try so hard to prove himself to me, that he'll likely injure me at some point. Maybe I'm Harry. Maybe I'm James. Maybe it doesn't even matter.

Let the fun commence...

Author's notes – Thanks for reading. I've always thought that Harry in most stories is a bit easy on Dobby and his role during book 2. I'd be suspicious of the little guy. I also don't like those stories where Harry gets memories from person X and suddenly he can do everything overnight. So, he'll be working on it next chapter, which will cover the summer. For future expectations, it will be an overhaul of the Tournament with more tasks and different champions. I always thought that 3 tasks spread between October and June was a bit lame. There will also be some kind of team competition. After all, the contest between the schools should be for bragging rights about the highest quality of education as well as the best individual student champion. There's also the problem of a Dark Lord out there. Let me know what you think of my version of the Sorting Hat.

Disclaimer – This is a work of fan fiction. It is based off JKR's work. I make no claims of ownership whatsoever. Enjoy the show.

Acknowledgements – Thanks again for the vast number of reviews. I do my best to respond to each and every one. Since it's the only payment I will ever receive from this, I appreciate it. Tip of the hat for the chapter title to Lord Dwar and his excellent story.

Warnings – Liberal use of foul language and Oedipus Simplex read on to find out what that's about. If this story offends you, I recommend you read something else.

Chapter 3 – The Summer of Change

Friday July 16, 1994

"And I wonder what revelations await us tonight, Potter? I never had Evans pegged for doggy style stuff the face in the pillow type. She always seemed like such a missionary prude. Just goes to show you how the years can change a person, doesn't it?"

Oedipus Simplex – it's the simple fact of remembering what James and Lily used to do together, often. I feel so dirty. That was the highlight of last night's entertainment. I have no idea what tonight holds in store for me and the foul-mouthed Hat. I've been doing this for fifteen nights; drink three potions, slam the Hat on my head and scream my bloody throat raw discovering the shrinking blackness of my repressed memories. Fortunately, the ward stones prevent me from waking up the neighborhood

Arriving here at stately Number 4, I was treated to the usual stern lecture from Vernon and the same recriminating looks from Petunia. My fake trunk is currently locked up with my fake wand in my old bedroom under the stairs. Dobby has somewhat grown on me. He had my books except for Potions hidden in my closet and the rest of my trunk along with the all the ingredients in the garage. Sure enough, a quick comment to Vernon about the dingy look of the garage and I had a summer project. Well let's be honest – Dobby had a summer project. I can look out my window at night and barely make out his shape dashing to and fro, actually had to warn him to slow down a bit.

Otherwise, I'm guessing I'd be up on the roof cleaning the gutters, which is significantly harder to fake. Sadly, I told the walrus that I'd be done shortly. I'll need a new 'project' soon

Dobby's got a steady supply of food coming in to supplement the ridiculously small portions forced upon me by Dudley's diet. It almost makes up for waking up in the morning and having him right in front of my face staring at me with those huge eyes! First time that happened I almost wet myself! It took less than three days of that for me to turn my 'second hand obviously seen better days' bed around and sleep facing the wall.

Still, the little psychopath keeps the house clean and somehow manages to stay out of sight. I could learn a thing or two from him about stealth. Though, I've gotten a few strange looks when I come back out of the kitchen in five minutes and the dishes are washed, rinsed and put away. I can see it's starting to get to Petunia. She came behind me the other night and checked for anything she could find, while looking at me suspiciously. To the other two 'cleaning the plates' involves using their tongue, so no worries there.

As for the Hat, Flitwick came through with the literal 'feather in my cap'. He charmed a feather so that when I touch it there's a potent glamour that makes it look like a simple ball cap with the Manchester United logo on it. We take a spin through the park and slip out on the town, in the early afternoon when the oaf's at work, the pig's scrounging for food from his little thug friends, and the horse is having her afternoon 'lie in'. It's either a nap on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays, or tea with all the other busy bodies and trading lies on the other days.

It's kind of odd playing tour guide to a Hat, especially when the blasted thing can pick up my surface thoughts. Walking around the town, I'm treated to such fascinating dialogue as, "Tell me HJ, might there be any places in this misbegotten pisshole that you haven't gotten the shit kicked out of you?" It calls me HJ, because it knows that it is mildly annoying, but either it's mellowing or I'm just becoming numb to it, because I find myself starting to enjoy its company. The two of us took in a bit of a football game the other day and it regaled me with a story of it going to Afghanistan at one point and watching a

game on horseback played with a dead calf. Apparently, that was a real game and not this 'Nancy Boy' shit. I recommended that he try and hang out next summer with Dean Thomas and make certain to tell him that.

I've done my best to keep up with Ron and Hermione. I'm sure they'll still complain that it's not enough. I can't exactly tell them what I am really up to and how I'm beginning to question their role in my newly discovered, or is that rediscovered life.

So far what I've learned is that history does in fact repeat itself. Hermione might as well be Remus, the brains in the outfit. She's already got the freaky hair thing going on, but she's a sharp one and the one most likely to pick up on all my changes. Ron quite literally is a poor man's Sirius Black, though every once in awhile he too shines through with something utterly brilliant. Then, there is my relationship with Neville Longbottom. If someone had asked me what I thought of Frank and Alice's boy a few weeks ago, I'd have said, 'Quiet bloke, a bit clumsy, frightening in a good way in Herbology and frightening in a bad way in Potions.' Subconsciously, he must remind me of the Rat and I've always kept my distance from him.

So yes, history does repeat itself – I have my own dysfunctional version of the Marauders. I suppose at some point I'd start chasing after my own version of Lily. Sue Bones has the right hair color, but Tracy Davis has more of the look complete with the 'stay the hell away from me Potter' attitude. That said; James Potter was a spoiled rich boy. He was a real Casanova. He had it, used it, and on more occasions than I'd like to admit flaunted it. Harry is the aloof hero; I could use that whole 'tragically sad hero' song and dance to get in bed with a few of the seventh years and damn near everyone below that. Problem with that being, they're girls and I'm suddenly looking at them with an adult's eyes, all while being stuck in a soon to be fourteen year old body. I'm reminded that the ones who are starting to develop and really lose the baby fat, well, they still have baby fat and that's the problem.

I'll probably need to obsess about something else. Otherwise it's going to be a sad, sad final three years until I'm where I can comfortably date any one of these girls. The hardest hit will probably

be little Ginny. Looking back, she tries so hard to get my attention. Sorry 'kiddo', but it's going to be even harder now, you should try again like maybe when you're twenty.

Hell, I'm still trying to piece together when, where, and with whom James lost his virginity. It's no surprise that Lily avoided him like the plague! James was a man-whore with an eye for the exotic types. A certain fascination that seems to have carried over to the new me, I wonder if Cho's aunt Cho Ri can still get her ankles up to her head? Only Sirius had more notches in his wand holster.

Anyone care to know another interesting fact that has been playing complete and utter havoc with my life? James Potter was left handed. It's been screwing with my spell casting for years now! Give me a 'point and shoot spell' like the Patronus Charm; I come through like a champ. Want me to do some swish and flick stuff and the James in me is telling the Harry in me that we're both doing it backwards. Try wrapping your mind around that a few times and get back to me. Still, now that I know it and recognize it, I'll be able to retrain myself.

The magic itself is coming back, nicely too. Old Jimmy knew a few wandless tricks. I can already levitate the heavy barbells Dudders uses for weight training. Oddly enough, I'm using them to get stronger in a different sense. My summoner can barely bring the Hat drifting across the room from my dresser. I'd really hate to try and summon my wand back to me in the heat of battle! It needs much more work and I expected that, but even more bizarre is my wandless banisher is stronger than the elder Potter's ever was. You certainly won't hear me complaining about that! It's a continuing theme of similar but different that leads me no closer to discovering my true identity. I haven't dared try to change into my Animagus form, at least not until I can be around someone to help me if I get into a tight spot. I might be able to swear Oliver to secrecy. He's about the only one I could trust that's old enough to cast spells. I'll have to see how he acts when I see him at Puddlemere's games. Rather nice of him to send me a few tickets.

Continuing with the man-whore theme, Jimmy's summoner well let's just say from the right angle, it could pull a pair of knickers off a pretty bird say from the other side of the Gryffindor common room, not rip

them and leave them twirling on his finger two seconds later. Let's just say that and leave it alone, okay? Alice didn't mind so much, she always was a good sport, but Frank damn near killed me. It also got Lily's attention something fierce in a bad way at first, but then she started demanding to know everything I knew about wandless magic. Those first few lessons at the end of our fifth year coupled with the loss of my parents, or should I say grandparents in the sixth year were turning points in our relationship. This is all one big bloody riot coming from a soon-to-be fourteen year old, not yet in his fourth year.

The memories aren't all bad or disturbing in a squicky way. I remember so many pranks – the good times. Most of them were before the war really heated up at the beginning of JP's sixth year. Hell, the best prank I can remember, thus far, was actually from the Rat. He convinced three other fifteen year olds, including the sheltered Halfblood, who were all quite ignorant of the Muggle world to imbibe some aging potions and go to a club in London to see an American Disco band. He failed to identify the type of club or the orientation of the crowd, but at least I learned how to do the YMCA so it wasn't a complete loss.

It's also nice to remember what real parents and a real home life was like, not this grotesque abomination I am currently experiencing. I'll be fixing that soon. There are going to be a few changes here at Number Four.

"Well HJ, are you going to man up and take the damn potions or are you just going stand there and wait for the rest of your memories to come back to you?"

"You really are a piece of work aren't you?"

"I'm Godric's finest achievement. Don't let the myth fool you, he was as nasty as they came a thousand years ago. He drank excessively, cheated on Helga with both of her sisters, but he was positively lethal with wand, staff and sword. Winning the battles made him feel alive. It was the times of peace killed him. He didn't need to go after Slytherin when he left. The drunken fucker wanted to! Ravenclaw stuck his sword inside of me to hide it from him, but he left anyway. Stupid dickless bastard paid the price for his pride!"

I digested that little tidbit about the founders as the Hat continued, "That's right HJ – not all that glitters is gold. They all had their flaws. You'd do well to remember that. Now are we going to do this or not?"

I grab the slam the three potions down my throat one after another and pull the Hat onto my head wondering what waits on the other side of the Darkness in my mind.

I recognize the place, the Potter Cottage at Godric's Hollow. I see Lily playing with baby Harry. She'd lost a good deal of weight since the Harry's birth; so much that I was beginning to seriously worry about her. The war and the pressure were getting to her. I remember feeling bitter, that the war and the forced exile were driving a wedge into our marriage. I'd leave home to go train as a professional duelist and come home to find her in tears or in the middle of some obscure ritual.

Lily was an obsessive type. There was no 'halfway' with her. It was one of her most endearing qualities. It was also rather scary. If we weren't Unplottable, I'd venture to guess that there were at least three separate occasions that I know of where she'd have been carted off to Azkaban for the kind of shit she pulled in her 'private chamber'.

One time that would have put me in Azkaban for a different reason hurts the most. I didn't want to think about the occasion I caught her with Remus Lupin. Sirius always thought I agreed with him that Remus was a Dark Creature and that's why he shouldn't be our Secret Keeper. No, the real reason was I came home early from training and found him 'comforting' Lily. It was the last time James Potter ever spoke to Remus Lupin and the words exchanged were not pleasant. I wasn't about to trust a man, who'd sleep with another man's wife with our safety. Hell, I almost sent Lily and Harry into hiding alone. Alice and Frank talked me out of it. I visited them often. They were the only ones that could understand. Maybe it was the difference being two years older could make, but they were handling it better than we were.

Lily tried, but failed to excuse her behavior. She blamed the pressure. She blamed me. She blamed the blasted prophecy. She blamed everything and everyone, but herself. Her need to justify herself was her least endearing trait.

That thrice cursed prophecy, Harry or Neville – one of them, or is that us, was destined to be the undoing of Voldemort. Needless to say the last month of James Potter's life had been the worst. Outside, my friends were dying. Inside, my marriage was falling apart at the seams. Some days I prayed that it would be Frank and Alice's burden. Other days I just wanted it to end and didn't care how either. How blasted brave and noble is that? We were trapped like Peter in that ridiculous cage that Sirius bought for him in our fifth year hoping that the jogging wheel would help alleviate his baby fat problem.

The realization of the prophecy itself brought with it a tidal wave of memories; Dumbledore breaking the news, followed by denial, panic, anger, anguish and finally acceptance. The old Wizard always had a piss poor way of breaking bad news. It was right after hearing that Marlene and her entire family had been slaughtered that he delivered that little gem. Guess who overheard it and ran running to his Master? I've stumbled on yet another reason for me to hate that sniveling greasy fucker. My guess is that it was only his life debt owed to me that forced him to go running back to Dumbledore after Harry was born.

Somehow, I know the coming memories are very important. I feel myself reacting as the wards are breached. I see the panic in Lily's eyes as she tries to Apparate with Harry and then tries to use the Emergency Portkey. I order her upstairs and see her flee not even stopping to grab her wand. I throw a few of my best reinforcing charms on the door, hoping to hold until Dumbledore and the Order get here. I move all the furniture in the room towards the door as it buckles and collapses.

I feel the fear and anticipation churning in the pit of my stomach. It's him! I had hoped and prayed that it was the underlings. It wasn't! I stave off the panic. I had prepared for this. Stick to the plan! Little Harry's stuffed dog looking rather like a certain grim, morphs into the real thing, as 'Enrico' the stuffed vulture Lily detests so much swoops

from its perch into the path of his killing curse. There's no way I'm going down that easy! Not in my house!

I dive away from the powerful blasting curse hurled at the floor sending a shower of debris into the air and opening a fissure into the cellar below. He's so fast that I didn't even see him kill the transfigured grim. On my command, my favorite recliner charges him morphing into a wild boar. A cutting curse splits it in two, but the momentum of the body forces Voldemort to leap over the hog.

Forcing power into my casting I bellow, "Lacero! Impactus!" Would I succeed in defying him a fourth time?

I expected my cutter to come back at me off his shield, but not the bludgeoner too! How bloody powerful is he? I barely dodge my own volley of spells, but it costs me the initiative. I'm on the defensive now. I banish an end table in the path of his next curse and feel the pain of the splinters of cherry digging into my flesh like hot needles when he obliterates it.

I dive behind the couch bleeding everywhere. Get out of here Lily! Save our son!

I gather my wits while he gloats, "Oh James, you're just a poor deluded boy. Where is your confident swagger now? Where is Dumbledore's little lapdog with your money and family connections who turned down my generous offer? I told you I'd take it all from you and so I have. Am I not a man of my word? Your family's great manor? Put to the torch. Your rich and powerful parents? Executed at my command. Now, all you have left is this quaint little cottage and a collection of vaults you'll never see again. You should have known Prongs, never trust a rat..."

The white hot anger purges my fear. I banish the couch at him and wandlessly summon the bookshelves behind him hoping to crush him, but the green light streaking towards me is unavoidable....

"The elf has already cleaned your vomit. You went into convulsions coming out of the trance. If it hadn't unblocked your airway, you'd have died." Am I imagining things or do I detect a hint of pity from the Hat's voice in my head.

"Maybe that would have been for the best. Fuck! How about that shit? What god did I offend to get this kind of karma?" I pull the Hat up on my forehead enough to see the quivering house elf in the corner of the room and give him a weak, grateful smile.

"Done feeling sorry for your lot in life yet? If not, take me off until you are. This maudlin, whiny 'woe is me' yank your wanker routine was old a week ago."

I fire back, "Way to kick a guy when he's down you worthless piece of shit!"

"Ah but now, you're angry at me and not crying about shit you can't change. Welcome back to the present HJ. Unless you were actually closet fudge packer and Snape was trying to pay off his debt to you on his knees, that's probably the most startling revelation coming our way. Now that it's out of the way, you can start thinking about what you are going to do about it!"

I pull the Hat off my head. It prefers to talk in my head, I'd rather act like a human instead of the 'freak' I've actually turned out to be. It's the end of the world! Vernon Fucking Dursley was right about me all along! I am a freak. The end all beat all is that when Riddle does return; I'm the one that has to put an end to him! I catch myself mentally berating Dumbledore for never telling Harry. I'm Harry!

"Here I thought I was three and oh against Riddle; all along, I was really six and one. What do I do about the eventual rematch? I don't know. I suppose I need to train. James lasted just over one bloody minute against him in a room he had prepared to fight someone in! Not exactly the best endorsement of my newfound abilities. At least, he'll expect me to be a wet behind the ears ickle school kid."

The Hat nods sagely, "That's right HJ. Let's look at how you can use this to your advantage. Harry's much stronger than James ever was.

You get back in form and you throw in that power and your enemies will be in for a shock.”

The two of us fall silent for a time. I ask Dobby for a drink and he brings me some milk to wash the taste of vomit out of my mouth. I only have enough for two more nights of potions. The rest of JP’s memories will have to trickle back on their own. I need to get out of here. I need to get some things. I need to go back – there.

“Hat, tomorrow we’re going to see the Hollow. I had some stuff stashed elsewhere on the property. If Sirius hasn’t raided it already, it’ll come in handy.”

Author’s notes – And now chapter 3 is out of the way! As for the contest, Vash has withdrawn his participation and though Bioplague mentions that he is still in, I have yet to see any actual production from him. My updates on this will be rather sporadic as completing my first two stories takes precedence. If by the next month, I haven’t seen anything from my competition, I will go ahead and start working with my team to make the story have more polish. Thanks for all the reviews, let me know what you think of this one.

Disclaimer – This is a work of fanfiction. The only compensation I receive from it is the reviews of the readers.

Acknowledgements – To my knowledge the contest at DLP is pretty much over. Vash withdrew and Bioplague claimed he was working on something, but all I've seen from him is a big bunch of nada. So, consider the 'Put Up or Shut Up' challenge to be over. I see no point in punishing you readers by not working with the talent of Alpha Fight Club and hopefully will get the first three chapters edited and reposted with many less errors. I'd like to thank ZanyMuggle and FairyQilan for the beta work on this chapter.

Chapter 4 – Of Innuendo and Ice Cream

Saturday July 17, 1994

"Where have you been boy?" Vernon raises his voice from the living room. I'm in no mood for it, not after the day I've had. It's enough to draw the attention of Pig Junior from the telly and Aunt Horsey from her gossip rags. Ah, the ideal picturesque family; I'd like to kill them right now. I drop the shopping bags in my arms and glare at them.

The 'ballcap' on my head whispers into my mind, "I'd bear witness for you. It'd be justifiable..."

I mull over the offer as the oaf repeats his question with extra emphasis on each word. Fine, I'll answer him. "Godric's Hollow. That's where I was, Godric's Hollow – the same Godric's Hollow where I was born. You wouldn't happen to know what I found there, you bunch of miserable liars."

Vernon looked angry, but it was Petunia who looked ashen. Dudley just looked confused. He can eat an Oreo, but I wondered if he could spell it? Since they weren't about to speak up, I continued. "All these years of telling me and everyone else how I was dumped on your doorstep by my worthless penniless parents and today I found out that you made a tidy sum selling the land off to land developers." Pointing at the Tesco bags on the ground, I continued, "I found out you can never go home again, but you can shop there."

For twenty minutes, I just stood there and stared at where the cottage had been. Even the Hat had the good sense to not mock me, though I could sense it wanted to. It took another two hours, a few conversations with the rather helpful store manager, and a telephone call to Gringott's public line to unravel exactly what, or more precisely who, had happened to the parcel of land gifted to the Potter family by Henry II in 1170 for helping extricate the king from a problem involving a certain clergyman.

A little over a year after I had arrived on their doorstep, the land was sold to the Joy & Cornell Development Group by Petunia Dursley. The helpful and not so concerned with Muggle legalities Goblins were able to tell me that the Dursley's paid off the note on Number 4, established a trust fund for Dudley Dursley, and purchased a brand new 1982 Volvo Station Wagon and Aston Martin Volante – all in the same year.

“Get out!” Vernon bellowed. “I’ve had it with you!”

I just smiled at him, “Not a chance. If I was to ‘get out’, it would only be to go find a solicitor.”

“And do what?” He sputtered. “We had every legal right to that money and you can’t do a thing about it.”

“Not quite true, Vernon. The fact you established a trust fund only for Dudders would work against you. The papers love these kinds of stories, greedy relatives stealing the orphaned boy’s inheritance and what not. Oops, apparently Dudders didn’t know about that – terribly sorry to ruin the surprise. I might not win, but with the stink I’d make, your names would be ruined.”

Vernon regained his composure. He is a salesman and a slimy one at that. “I don’t think so, boy. You don’t have much of a reputation around here, after all...”

“Ah, but reputations and neighborhood gossip only go so far, don’t they? Where’s my police record? You’ve got nothing. What do I have, proof you sold off my family’s land and didn’t spend a bit of the money on me. After I’m done with you, you’ll be worried about your

reputation - that carefully crafted façade of being such well-to-do people. I'd make certain the management at Grunnings heard about it and all the neighbors too. How would you like it with all the people staring at you? Plus, what do you think my people will do to you?" I let the threat linger in the air for a moment much to the applause of the Hat in my mind.

"Boy ..." Would this idiot ever learn?

"The man who found us back when I was eleven, he was thrown out of school in his third year. Remember the tail? Now think about what someone who finished all seven of their years could do."

I've never quite understood these idiots. It's not like I'm never going to graduate from that school. Hell, technically I've already graduated once. Do they honestly think I'll just forget all this?

"You wouldn't dare," he threatened.

"Believe what you want to believe. I'm done talking to you." I head upstairs to my bedroom.

Once inside, I dump the contents of my shopping spree on the sad looking and lumpy single bed.

'Rather heavy handed there, HJ?' The voice in my mind speaks. 'Felt good too, didn't it? I'm surprised you didn't go with physical violence. I'm actually rather disappointed.'

"You know inside the room with the silencing charms up, you can speak out loud? It wouldn't hurt anything."

"Quit being such a prissy little whiner, HJ! If you're going to take it out on someone, take it out on them. What happened to all those plans you were making on the trip home? Or are you all talk and no action?"

I suppose the Hat's a bad influence on me, but it did feel good. On the Knight Bus ride back, I had thought of all the pranks the late great James Potter had performed and the things I could do to them, but

I'm not a prankster, at least not anymore. I'm not Fred and George, but I could teach them a thing or two. Plus if I started down that road, especially with the Dursleys, I might not stop. It is the same kind of shit that got Sirius in trouble back in school – not knowing where the line was.

As I sift through the new clothes and trainers on the bed, I look at the small satchel, which was the real prize. Near the back of the property, beyond the shopping center in the woods that still remained was a chestnut tree with his childhood tree fort in it. The whole thing had a Notice-Me-Not ward on it, so you had to be specifically looking for it. Not nearly as good as the Fidelius, but it takes a good deal of power to cast that behemoth. It required both Lily and I to cast it on the property and we collapsed for several hours afterward.

James had set this place up as a little hidey hole and filled it with some emergency supplies. Unfortunately, Sirius had already raided it; the broom, the spare wand, most of the books, and the stash of money were all gone. All that was left was some garbage, animal droppings, a couple of tattered blankets that must have helped the old dog through some tough nights, and a plain looking book with a worn cover hidden in a false bottom of a battered oak dresser.

Most of the old families have their secrets, and the Potters were no different. I held in my hand an Anybook. Down in the Potter Vault, there are several bookshelves. The Anybook is connected to one of those shelves. Books placed on that shelf are viewable from the pages of this one. The charms on this one needed to be reset and I'd have to get in to bookshelves in the vault to do it, but as long as I'm not trying to take anything out of the vault, the goblins shouldn't have any issues.

On her stand, my owl is sleeping peacefully; she's got a letter attached to her leg. I gently untie the ribbon, doing my best to not wake her up. It never works; she wakes up, raising a perturbed eye at me.

"Sorry girl," I say fishing a treat out of the small tin of food I keep on the nightstand as I sit down and open the letter. Inside is visitor's pass to the Puddlemere training facilities and a note from Ollie.

Harry,

Good to hear from you mate! Drop by practice tomorrow and I'll show you what real Quidditch looks like! We can talk then. Bring your broom.

Ollie

He seems to have forgotten who was abusing him in the hoops the last week of school. I believe the reserve keeper for Puddlemere needs a reminder. Still, I need him to back me up when I try my Animagus transformation, so I can't whip him too badly.

Walking down the stairs in the morning carrying my broom in its case, I'm greeted by the sight of my family waiting for me. "What now?"

Dudley wastes no time in grabbing me and put me in a hold, sending the Hat flying into the corner and my Firebolt to the ground. I debate the merits of wandlessly banishing him across the room. No, I'll wait and see where this is headed. Vernon produces a clear plastic sandwich bag full of substance that looks a bit like oregano. In his most sinister sounding voice, which given that I've been through, sounded rather cartoonish he says "We're having a bit of an intervention here, boy! We've decided to nip this in the bud so; we're just going to hold you here until the police can be summoned to search your room."

If I wasn't so angry at the moment, I'd find this rather humorous. "Did you stay up all night thinking this one up Vernon? Did you even stop to think about how quickly Dudley managed to acquire what's in your hands?"

"Shut your mouth! Just because some of Dudder's friends have some parental issues doesn't give you the right to toss out any accusations! Give me a moment to put this upstairs and then go ahead and ring the police, Pet!"

“Looks like you got me this time, Vernon. I bow to your superior planning. You’ve clearly outsmarted me. If only there was a way that I could get rid of it before the police get here. What will I ever do?”

I suffer through the next forty-five minutes of waiting for the police to come and search my room. Naturally, thanks to Dobby, they don’t find anything. Needless to say the officers gave me a rather stern warning to stay off drugs and Vernon got a warning about phoning in reports without any proof. They were nice enough to leave several pamphlets for parents of children who use drugs. Hopefully they’ll read them. It might help!

“I don’t know what you did, but this isn’t over!”

From my seat on the couch, I look at Vernon and drum my fingers on the coffee table. “That’s where you’re wrong, Vernon. This bullshit ends now. I’m going to stay here for as long as the protection Lily Potter gave to me lasts, and I won’t be doing a damn thing around here any more. If you even so much as think about trying to hurt me, or trying this lame-assed crap again, I’ve got a surprise for you. Dobby! Come on out!”

The jittery elf peered from around the stairs. “But Mister Harry Potter said to not let the nasty Dursleys see him?”

“It’s okay, Dobby,” I said ignoring Petunia’s gasp. “This is Dobby. He’s the one that’s been doing all the chores around here. He’s my elf.”

“Get rid of that damn thing this instant!” Vernon stood with his fists balled.

“Not happening. I wouldn’t go any closer, Uncle. I watched this elf throw a grown man into a wall by snapping his fingers. Dobby broke my arm just to trying to help me. He doesn’t react well in stressful situations.”

Turning to the little psycho I said with as much anger as I could put in my voice, “Show them the knife trick!”

Dobby's eyes grew big as he waved his hands and the cleaver, the butcher's knife and four steak knives flew in from the kitchen and hovered in the middle of the room. The elf waved his hands guiding them in an intricate dance across the room. Truth be told, it scared the willies out of me when he did it out in the garage with two just two knives out of my Potion's kit. I pointed to Vernon's recliner and Dobby buried all six, right where Vernon had been sitting less than thirty seconds ago. I'll give him points for showmanship – the pattern looks like a smiley face.

"I'll put it like this. I only technically need Aunt Petunia alive for the protective magic to keep working, but I'm not a killer. I just want to be left alone. Dobby's my insurance policy. If I suddenly turn up arrested, dead, or badly injured, he's going to come after all three of you and there's nowhere you can hide from him. This goes for your little gang of thugs too, Dudders. Dobby can do all kinds of useful things too! He knows where brake lines are on cars, how to loosen lugnuts, the difference between baking powder and rat poison, all very useful things – wouldn't you say?"

Push me far enough and I'll push back. Without James Potter's memories and life experience, I wouldn't have known where Godric's Hollow was, or how to track down the details of the sale. I also probably would have snapped and followed through with the threat I just made. I'm just glad they couldn't touch the Potter vaults or anything else. Makes me wonder if they tried?

All in all, I am surprised by the depths of my own hatred for the pieces of shit in front of me. The whole promise of certain death is more of a spur of the moment thing, but damn if it hasn't got their attention, though. The three of them just stare at the knives embedded in the worn-down recliner.

"You stay out of my way and I'll stay out of yours. I come and go as I please. I sleep here, and I'll take care of my own food. You can pretend I don't even exist. Go ahead and fix that, Dobby. You've made your point."

The elf waves his hand causing the knives to float back into the kitchen and the worn leather to stretch and join back together, just like nothing had ever happened.

“Now, if you’ll excuse me, I’ve got things to do today and they don’t involve the lot of you. Dobby, get rid of the locks on my door and move the rest of my stuff up to my room.”

To emphasize my point I summon the sorting hat and broom case wandlessly from where they had fallen as I walk out the door.

It would be far easier to Apparate, but technically, Harry has never done it, nor do I have a license for it. Thus, I’m waiting for another jarring ride to the Alley courtesy of the Knight Bus. Even with a different crew from the blokes at night, they still drive reckless and all over the place – must be a perk of the job. Maybe I can talk Ollie into getting me a Portkey to his place and I can pop over there in the mornings and use his Floo to get around.

‘A rather judicious use of terror back there, HJ. I thought the old man was going to wet himself. Still, I would have had the elf injure either the man or the boy just to prove a point. Worthless shits like that only can handle so much blackmail, but they understand physical force.’

Not wanting to be seen talking to myself while I’m waiting for my ride, I think back, ‘You’re still thinking tenth century terms, wanker. Wake up and join the modern era! Vernon gets threats all the time where he works – sales quotas, production shortages and the like. I threatened his job. Death isn’t in the front of peoples minds anymore. The knives were sufficient for that. Now, threatening his comfy lifestyle, that really hits home. He knows there’s a chance they’d cut him loose over a black eye like this.’

The Hat grumbles that I lack the necessary spine to give my Uncle a richly deserved castration; I thank him for any imagery relating to Vernon and his testicles. Deciding to bring the conversation back to a more productive topic, I start thinking about how to determine the

strength of the wards around Number Four. I don't want to spend a single minute longer than I have to there!

'If you could get into the fossil's office, I know he has instruments to monitor such things?'

'Already looking for a way back?'

'Go fuck a goat, you insipid little ball of sphincter puss! I was merely making a suggestion.'

'Damn! Where do you come up with these things? It's too risky anyway. I'd have to figure out how to use the equipment. Plus with all the paintings, Fawkes, and the rest, I just don't think it's worth the risk. Unless they've changed the laws in the past twenty years, ward diagnostic spells aren't covered by underage restrictions. I'll have to stop by Hopkirk's office and verify, but you have to love all the little loopholes in the laws for pureblood households.'

'Nice, HJ. Use the system for your own benefit. I still say you'd have made a decent Slytherin.'

'Shit! Malfoy'd be dead by now if I was.'

'You sound awfully certain of yourself. Let me provide an image of what a tiny little pathetic shit you were at age eleven.' Even I have to admit that eleven-year-old Harry Potter looked like a good strong wind would knock him over.

'You're forgetting a certain prophecy that we know about now. We both know he'd make a move, but my guess is it'd backfire spectacularly.'

'But you can bet Snape would have tried even harder to expel you?' The bus appears out of the ether and begins decelerating by the bench I'm sitting next to.

'He's just trying to weasel out of paying a life debt back to James. It's still probably driving him up the wall that the debt carried over. I

wonder if on some level he suspects that I am sort of James and sort of Harry?’

‘Perhaps. He’s whined his fair share in Dumbledore’s office about you.’

‘Now that I know the whole story behind the werewolf incident, I’ll find a way to make sure it comes out during the course of the year.’

‘I’d be careful. You might have to explain how you came by that knowledge.’

‘They’ll be too busy trying to deny it, but if they do I’ll say Remus told me in response to Snape spreading the news of his furry little problem.’ I debated the merits of this. Causing more problems for Remus isn’t necessarily a good thing. He’s had a hard life. On the other hand, James caught him sleeping with Lily. Part of me just can’t overlook that no matter how hard I try. Maybe, I’ll blame Sirius instead.

I climb the steps and hand over my fare, absently listening to the conductor’s usual speech. Grabbing the pole to support myself, I brace for the sudden acceleration.

Now that I am afflicted with the appreciation James had for all things fast, I find the bus isn’t all that bothersome.

The Alley’s all hustle and bustle. It’s hard to reconcile both the sets of memories in my head. Harry’s memories say it is business as usual, but the other set remembers the war and people nervously hustling through the Alley and making eye contact only when necessary. I find myself looking at the rooftops and remembering a battle fought across the skyline between the Order of the Phoenix, the Ministry, and the Death Eaters. In the darkness of night, it had been impossible to tell what side anyone was on.

‘You need to relax, Dipshit! You’re giving me a headache.’

‘You can speak out loud now if you want. I don’t think anyone here would care if I have a talking hat on.’

Much to my annoyance, the Hat continues the mindspeak as we thread our way towards the bank.

Walking up the steps past a trio of Goblins at the entrance, the Hat suddenly speaks out loud. "... and that's the story of how Goblins and garden gnomes come from the same family tree. Essentially, they are the same creatures. Personally, I find the gnomes are more beneficial to society." Three heads whip around in unison towards me.

"What? Why the hell did you just say that out loud?" 'Are you trying to get me killed?'

"I thought you preferred it when I spoke out loud? If these vermin were important, they wouldn't be here at the front." Nice to see the Hat's disposition doesn't change when dealing with another race of creatures!

Trying to keep my eyes on the trio, which is hard since every blasted Goblin dresses the same except for managers, I slide into the shortest line. The one person in front of me finishes her business and I'm next. Is it my imagination or is he taking his time servicing me?

Eventually, after having to argue about the terms and conditions that allow an underage Potter to visit the family vault, I was directed to the carts with a slip of paper written in Gobbledygook.

Mentally, I question the Hat as I enter the cart, 'What the hell are you doing? Any particular reason you want to get the Goblins angry?'

My answer comes, but not from the Hat. Apparently, there is a second faster speed to the carts and I get to hold on for my bloody life while the Hat howls in joy. The speed of our descent brings back the hazy memories of falling off my Nimbus last year after being on the bad end of a Dementor encounter.

'I've been waiting years to do that again!'

Two hours later, I'm out of the bank and away from the homicidal glares of the low-level Goblin underlings. I made a sizeable withdrawal from my trust account and I reestablished the association with the Anybook and the bookshelf in the Potter Family Vault. The longest time was spent sorting through what books I might to read until I could come back here during the Christmas holidays.

Eventually, I selected roughly half of the books that had been on James Potter's shelf, as well as a number of arcane tomes that Lily had been using prior to her death. It was a good mixture of dueling, wards, enchanting, charms, advanced Transfiguration, and a healthy sampling of rather obscure and questionable magic. Satisfied, I pricked my finger and let the blood flow over the gemstone embedded into the bookshelf and then touched the cover of the book to the gemstone to complete the association ritual. Now, I would be the only one able to open the book.

I decided not to linger in the family vault. There were a few memories of what James and Lily had done down here among all the books that made me feel rather uneasy. He'd brought her down here days after his parent's funeral. It was their first time. In a sense, Voldemort had been right. He had taken James's life away from and all that was left were a collection of meaningless vaults. Whoever I am, it doesn't really matter. What does matter is that I have a chance to get my life on track.

A hand on my shoulder interrupts my reverie. Shocked, I jump and curse myself for being so inattentive.

"Whoa. Easy there, Harry! I didn't mean to startle you!" Katie Bell says. She's got a mortified look on her face.

"No worries, I'm just not used to being grabbed." I sputter quickly. "What brings you to the Alley today?"

"I was doing some window shopping and picking up a few OWL study guides. My parents are already on me about making good marks."

"I'm sure you'll do fine, Katie."

She grabs my hand and starts leading me towards the ice cream shop. "Come on, I'll let you buy me an ice cream. So, what's your story? What brings the reclusive Harry Potter out into the Alley?"

"I'm just running a few errands and then going to watch the Amazing Ollie in practice." I can't really go on about handing out death threats and insulting Goblins, can I?

"Angie and I went last week. You'll be shocked at how organized everything is. It's a far cry from what I expected. I'm used to looking at Angie or 'Licia's scrawl on a piece of parchment for this new play they were thinking of over lunch. Puddlemere has these giant floating blackboards circling their practice facility with the plays on them! It's bloody brilliant! They've got coaches and trainers for each group of players."

James had played in the Spring Leagues, so I had a decent idea of what to expect. "You sound like you're intimidated." We take a seat. Apparently, I'm buying. She orders a banana split called 'Morganna's Delight'. I just order a triple scoop of French Vanilla with hot fudge.

"Well, after winning the cup last year. I kind of started thinking about my chances of going pro. Now, I'm not so sure."

"Katie, most people don't get invites to the Spring Leagues until after Hogwarts. Ollie's a freak of nature. You've got three full seasons to get your form up to speed. Once you've graduated, you can practice more without having to worry about studying. I think you've got a shot."

"That's easy for you to say, you could probably go pro right now."

"What can I say? Quidditch is in my blood. My Dad played in the Spring Leagues at the end of his fifth year. He was one of those freaks." He still is, sort of.

Further conversation is interrupted by our ice cream arriving. The Hat strikes while I'm swallowing my second bite. I damn near choke.

'Do me a favor and fuck her already.'

‘What!’

‘Never too early to start carving a set of notches into your wand holster, HJ. You know, you could chat her up for awhile, grab a room at the Cauldron, and seal the deal. You could ‘ring her Bell’. Who knows, you might even be her first.’

‘Shut up already! She’s a fifteen year old girl.’

“Harry, are you okay?” Katie looks worried.

“No, I’m fine.” I say, pulling off my ‘ballcap’ and setting it on the table. I have no intentions of continuing that particular conversation.

It’s the wrong move. The Hat takes this as its signal to openly participate. “Potter and I were just discussing whether you were trying to clumsily seduce him.”

Katie lets out a shriek as the voice startles her, before staring at the Hat curiously. “Harry?”

“It’s the Sorting Hat under a glamour. I’m doing research on it this summer.”

“Know why I put Bell in Gryffindor, HJ? She was out playing in the woods and fell out of a tree and broke her ruddy ankle. She managed to get back on her own five miles through a rainstorm.”

Katie looked confused for a second and then perturbed. “That’s not me. I think you’re talking about Alicia Spinnet.”

“Shit, I always confuse you two. Didn’t I try to put you into Hufflepuff?”

“Ravenclaw.” Katie sounds rather annoyed now. Ah, the mood swings of teenagers. Even if I was trying to ‘seal the deal’, the Hat clearly isn’t helping. I’m willing to bet it knows exactly what it’s doing.

“Whatever. Either way Bell had the balls to argue with me, so I figured Gryffindor.”

Katie had lightened her hair and gone from straight to curly hair to avoid looking like Alicia. The Hat probably pulled it out of my memories of her and made a few clever guesses.

“It’s just trying to get you angry, Katie. It’s really good at doing things like that. I got the cart ride of my life back in the Bank after it decided what a smashing idea it would be to insult Goblin heritage out loud.”

“It’s so rude!”

“Part of its charm. Trust me.”

“Relax Bell, I won’t try and talk HJ out of slipping you the sausage...”

“Hat!”

“Harry!”

“Oh please! You drag him over here and have him buy you a phallic symbol covered in chilled bovine lactate! The only thing missing was you didn’t offer him your cherry.”

Katie’s eyes bulge. “For fucks sake, Hat, shut up! No, Katie. It was the Hat making the suggestion. That’s why I took it off. Blasted thing is crude as can be and has over a thousand years worth of insults just waiting to be used.”

There’s an awkward moment of silence while Katie stares at her dessert in horror. She’ll probably never have a banana split again. Right about now, I’d give my left nut to be able to legally cast a silencing charm or a wandless one. Fortunately, Florean’s tables are charmed to keep the conversation from carrying to the next tables.

“If it’s so foul, I’m surprised they let it on children’s heads.”

“I watched it lay into Dumbledore right before we left. It called him a ‘has-been cashing in on past glories’ or something like that.”

“What’s wrong with it? Did Slytherin curse it before he left the school?”

“No. I was not cursed. If I was cursed, I’d put Muggleborns in the same rooms as the Pureblood fanatics and laugh when they eventually came to blows. No, Bell, the highlight of my year is singing a song and staring into the minds of idiotic eleven-year-olds and seeing what fascinating tales they have to offer. Then, I get shuttered up in the Headmaster’s office and listen to Dumbledore snore for the rest of the year. At least when Nigellus was Headmaster, he’d bring a bitch up there to diddle sometimes – gave a whole new meaning to the job of being Head Girl!”

I slap my forehead with my hand, humiliated. I’d like to think that it can’t get much worse, but I actually expect it could! I had thought when Hat had stopped being a flaming shit to me, that I could keep it under control in public. Not even close! I’ll be lucky if Katie ever speaks to me again. I scarf my ice cream like Ron when he’s missed a meal, so fast I’ll probably get a headache. I toss probably three times the money needed to pay for the treats, grab the damn thing and shove it on my head. I need to get out of here before things get any worse!

“Katie, listen ... I’ve got to run ...Ollie’s expecting me. I need to get this damn Hat out of here before it insults anyone else. I’ll send you an owl sometime.” The threat of Voldemort’s return couldn’t have driven me away from that table faster.

I put the Hat on probation focusing on my rapidly developing, or is that redeveloping Occlumency skills and block it. Since it doesn’t want to hold a civilized conversation, I give it the silent treatment for awhile. Another ride on the Knight Bus and they let me off at the Puddlemere practice facility. I pass through the gates and the security guards check my visitors pass. They send an intern, who I think is a ‘Puff in Ginny’s year running off to fetch Ollie, while I endure the usual glances at my forehead.

After a few minutes, I get bored enough to let my barriers down. Ollie might be in the rings right now.

‘What’s your problem, HJ?’

‘You were at the same conversation as I was. First you insult the crap out of her and then you try to make it look like it was my idea to get horizontal! I swear, you pull that kind of shit again and I’ll put you on Dobby’s head and let you see what’s in there!’

‘Oh quit being such a little bitch. I bet the next time she talks to you she’ll bring it up and laugh about it. I broke the ice for you. Furthermore, the next time she’s going after herself, it’ll be a green-eyed monster she’s imagining! You humans are all innuendo and doubletalk. I heard a few stray thoughts running through your head and tried to help you out. Helga’s youngest sister was Bell’s age when forty-year-old Godric started plowing her fields on a regular basis. He used to throw me on his head and brag about the good old days. You end up putting the beater bat to Bell there and you’ll thank me, or are you really going through with the whole, ‘I’m going to be a hermit for the next few years’ act until you decide they’re old enough for you. I’ve been alive a thousand years, so all of you are pretty much freshly squeezed sperm to me.’

Ollie’s timely arrival saves me from having to give my opinion of the Hat’s help. “Harry! Glad you could make it. Come on. I’m on a thirty minute break. I’ll give you the three-Knut tour.”

Wood’s proud of this place. He shows it off like his own home. I’m impressed as well. Puddlemere trains in style – swimming pools, cafeteria, weight rooms, racquetball courts, and a lot of the stuff I see in those weightlifting and boxing magazines that Vernon’s trying to get Dudley more interested in. Hell, I wish I could live here!

Along the way I meet a few of the players and some of the staff. I resist the urge to ask any of them for their autographs, but surprisingly a couple of them actually wanted to take a picture with me! It just goes to show you that fame is indeed a strange creature.

Eventually, Ollie leads me out onto the pitch and I get to watch him go through a session of practice drills. To be honest, I don't necessarily pay as much attention to the keeper drills. I split my attention between the seekers and the chasers. It reminds me that I need to get a pair of Omnioculars. The Hat seems to be having a good time. At least, it isn't making any more cracks about Katie Bell, so I'd have to call that a plus.

During the next intermission, Ollie comes over to me and offered me a chance to go flying while the other Quidditch players take a break. I mount my trusty Firebolt and take to the skies. I love flying. There's simply no other way to say it. I even keep the Hat on and let the crazy artifact enjoy the ride as I push the Firebolt to its limits. Though it's tempting to go through some of my seeker drills, it seems kind of foolish in front of a bunch of professionals. I settle for seriously hauling twig around the pitch and really opening up on the Firebolt.

I come in for a landing when the bell rings signaling that the players need to return to the pitch. "Nice flying there, Harry! You looked real good out there. What did you think, Carlson?" Oliver says addressing the first-string keeper.

Andrew Carlson, known around the league as 'The Spider', shakes his head. "It almost looked like you knew what you were doing out there. Pretty good for a kid."

Needless to say I'm a bit resentful about that remark, but I'm not the one who says something. "Shit, Carlson, I'll game-check you on Potter!"

I hear one of the other players that's close enough to hear Oliver's comment say, "Oh no, the rookie's calling out the vet. It looks like we got ourselves a little action, boys and girls!"

"Like I'd game-check you, Wood. You don't make half what I do and I know it!"

"I'll make up the difference, Andy," offers one of the starting chasers named Marcia Riggs. "We all keep hearing about your new contract. Let's see if you're worth the money."

Carlson looks irate. He's been backed into a corner and he knows it. "Very well, the little punk gets five shots. I'll game-check you if he can get one by me."

Now, call me crazy, but he is standing here insulting me when I hadn't even said one word to him. "And what happens if I get more than one by you?"

My pronouncement gathers a few impressive chuckles from the small group gathered around us.

"No way that can happen, kid!" At least, he didn't call me boy. I might've had to kill him.

"I tell you what, I get two by you and you wear a headband for the rest of the day that says 'Harry's bitch'? How about that?"

I suppose it's wrong for me to participate in such trash talking, but considering the day I've had, I could stand to let loose a bit of pent-up aggression. Andrew Carlson just happens to be a bit of a godsend. Not even waiting for his answer, I hop on my broom and fly over to the Quaffle rack.

Ollie flies over to me as I fly up to the center line. I move over and hand him the Sorting Hat. "Hold my hat. What's this all about, Ollie? I know enough to know a setup when I see it."

He looks at me with a wolfish grin on his face and says, "I went a little crazy with my signing bonus and need a little extra help with the rent. I figured this would cover the cost of whatever help you want from me. The thing with the headband is brilliant! Please, Harry, I'm begging you! Score two goals on that pompous, arrogant, son of a bitch!"

Unable to resist the grin on my face, I say "Why, Mr. Oliver Wood, I do believe the Weasley twins have been a rather poor influence on you. Do you have any advice for me?"

“Carlson's coming back from a torn rotator cuff on his left shoulder. He told the trainer it's still a little tender this morning. Now, go win me some money!”

Accelerating to maximum velocity, I dive down and to my left. I'm going to go back side on hand and try and range him by throwing a long crossing shot. Even if I don't make it, he's going to have to move fast. Plus, there's no way he would expect this move from a thirteen-almost-fourteen year-old on a fast broom.

Sure enough, as I cross to the backside, Carlson commits to the closest ring, where he expects my shot. I give a mighty heave and throw the long ball towards the far side of ring three. He's burned and he knows it, but the man's a professional and he makes a valiant try. Carlson almost stopped my shot, but almost stopping my shot is the difference between not being beaten by a 'kid' and Oliver getting a rather nice bonus!

The cheers of the laughter clearly make my day. I circle around in one of the laughing chasers on the ground tosses me in the second Quaffle. Now for the icing on the cake, I head straight at him, dip right and pump fake before sending a shot at ring one. He stops me at the doorstep, damn! It's a matter of pride to him now. I push him hard, but he stops Quaffle number three front-side low on ring three, as I try testing his healing arm.

Quaffle four, I actually beat him high side on ring two, but the Quaffle rebounded off the ring for a missed goal. I'm down to one. This calls for something special. I wonder if I can pull it off.

Oliver's partner in crime, Marcia, tosses me the last Quaffle and cheers me on. I circle back to the center line and get ready to start my attack run. They call this trick Culligan's Corkscrew. It's a barrel roll with an underhanded spin release. Where I release it depends on where I want it to go. Most of the time, the Quaffle comes out at an odd angle, and it's a low percentage shot, but it's damn near impossible to defend against. It adds the force from the maneuver to the speed of the throw. I close my eyes and take a calming breath and begin the barrel roll at top speed. It's a shot that chaser takes when he knows there's no bludger coming at him.

After three rolls, I release where I think ring one should be and peel off executing a dodge, instinctively. Beaters usually send a bludger towards a corkscrew out of principle.

Four hours later, I tumble out of the Floo, clutching my autographed picture of Andrew Carlson wearing his new headband. Ollie's still laughing as he pulls a beer out of a chill box that has three six packs of beverage, a head of browning lettuce, and nothing else. I let that slide.

"So let me get this straight, you can execute a textbook corkscrew, but you can't come out of the Floo?" I neglect to correct him that the Quaffle went through ring three, when I was aiming for ring one. It's what the group of Gryffindor's I sort of played with used to call 'Frank's Law' – if you can't be good, hope you're lucky! Picking myself off the floor, I'm hope there's something in my old memories that will help me with this nonsense, but JP never had the slightest problem with Floo travel.

I make a crude gesture and sit down on his couch clearing off the magazines and pizza boxes. "Good god, man, you're a pig!"

"Yeah, I need to straighten up. Tomorrow's our short day and Marcia and I are going out to dinner to celebrate my financial windfall!"

Casting my eyes about the place, I offer, "Two words Ollie, her place. Don't even think about bringing her back here!"

"Potter's right. This place is a shithouse. HJ, summon your elf and save me the pain of watching a supposedly grown man wallow like a pig in his own filth."

"Merlin's balls, Harry! What the hell is that?"

I take off the glamour and let him see the Hat. It takes a few minutes to properly convey the Hat's 'sunny disposition', but with it helping by

providing some comments along the way Ollie gets the hint pretty quickly.

I go ahead and summon Dobby, mainly because I'm pretty sure Ollie did plan on trying to bring Ms. Riggs back here and the elf looks like I just gave him an early birthday present – another place he can clean.

“Nice of the General Manager to give you an all-access pass to the facilities. Not too many get one of those. You know he's going to try and groom you for the Spring Leagues in your fifth year. After watching that corkscrew, he'd sign you right now if he could.”

Puddlemere's GM, Roger Benchly, had come over to me while Carlson was being fitted with his custom headgear. We had a pleasant chat during the next thirty minutes of practice. What he didn't know is that this was not the first time we had 'chatted'. Puddlemere had offered to sponsor James in his sixth year. Falmouth went one year lower and James took them up on their offer. During the horrible sixth year, Roger had heard that James was giving up Quidditch to instead become a Professional Dueler. He invited JP to Diagon Alley, where JP got a free lunch and Roger tried in vain to convince him not to let such talent go to waste. The man had a deep love for this game and reeked of professionalism. Time had apparently not changed him much.

By the next time Ollie landed and was toweling the sweat off his brow, I had agreed in principal to let Puddlemere sponsor me for the Spring Leagues in my fifth year. In exchange, for the rest of the summer and the next one, I can make use of the training facilities including the cafeteria. Roger wants me to try and get up around ten or eleven stone before they sponsor me. During the next break he enticed me into flying against their third string seeker. Neither of us caught the Snitch, but I more than held my own. I even managed a very nice disruption that allowed the Snitch to get away from her. Ollie was right; I could probably take her job as is. Diggory probably could as well.

After that nice bit of flying, Roger excitedly talked about petitioning the league for an early exemption for this year. He didn't think it was likely, but I could see that he was already adding merchandising

revenues to his bottom line. Damn. I probably need to get an agent before too long.

Bringing me back to the present, Ollie asks, "So, what help are you looking for Harry? Or do you want to be called HJ?"

"Harry's still fine. I need you to cast a spell in case I botch this."

"What are you going to botch, Apparition? I'm not so great at that."

"No. I'm an Animagus, or at least I think I am. I haven't tried to transform yet, but I need you to be able to perform the recovery spell if I get stuck in the middle. I can show you the motions. It's not too difficult."

"When did you learn? Damn! You have to show me. I've heard it can really help your game! What are you?"

I'm not sure how he managed to fit all that into one breath. "Ollie, this is serious business. I'll tell you the whole story if you give me a vow of silence."

Wood's eyes narrow when I say that. "People don't toss around words like oaths and vows like they're candy. Harry, are you sure you know what you're asking?"

"Damn straight, I do. When you hear it, you'll know why."

Ollie mulls it over and he agrees. The vow takes about ten minutes. I'm powerful enough to do this without a third person binding us. That alone impresses him. I really need to get this off my chest and he's the only one far enough removed from Hogwarts and those with prying eyes. I make him cast a privacy charm and then I make him remove it and show him a better one to use.

"My run in with the Dementors broke something loose in my mind. I found all these memories up there. The memories belong to James Potter. The night the Potter's were killed, there was so much arcane magic saturating that house that something weird happened, like how I picked up Voldemort's – shit, Ollie! It's just a name! Anyway, like

how I picked up the ability to talk to snakes. The Hat's been helping me sort through all of memories and make sense of it all. Hell, I'm not sure if I'm Harry remembering James or part of James stuck inside of Harry – it's how I suddenly became crazy good at chasing.”

Ollie scratches the tufts of hair growing on his chin. His next comment stuns me. “Damn, Harry! I wish you would have told me this earlier. I'd have gone double or nothing on Carlson.”

Clearly, it is not the reaction I expected. “You mean you're not freaked out about this?”

“Freaked out? No, I'm a little jealous. Besides, the Twins gave me the whole story on the sly about you down in the chamber killing the Basilisk. The thing with Black last year has so many holes in it there must be more to it. Not to mention, everyone's pretty sure you offed Quirrell. Besides, Harry, I grew up in this world. I have a cousin that likes to be transfigured into a tree for fun and have everyone call him Mr. Woody, so I'm pretty flexible.”

“Is his first name Malcolm?”

“Yeah.”

“James Potter and his friends were the ones that first did it to him.”

“No, shit! Now, that's a small world. So let me get this straight: James was an Animagus, so you think you're one.”

“That's right.”

“Okay, show me the motions to this spell.”

It takes about ten minutes to the point where I'm comfortable with Ollie's proficiency with the spell. Dobby's cleared enough room for me to have a go at it. I suppose I could backtrack and go through the whole process of becoming one again, with the potions the meditations, the partial transfigurations and everything, but neither James nor Harry have ever been accused of being the most patient individuals. The worst that could happen is a trip to St. Mungo's.

When you've 'died' once, that doesn't seem like such a frightening prospect.

I take a few calming breaths and try to center myself and tell myself the Animagus transformation is just like riding a broom. The animal shape is in the back of my mind. I just need to reach out and set it free. I feel a sharp pain in my head – the antlers must be sprouting. Prongs Junior reporting for duty! Gasping for breath, I stop and can't go any further. It's painful and it's hard. Maybe the whole potion and meditation thing isn't such a bad idea?

"Do you want me to do the spell, Harry? You look like you're stuck!" I open my eyes and look at the mirror Dobby brought out. My visions all blurry and I've grown a long snout sprouting fur running down my neck. The antlers are small, black, and curved slightly inward. I'm not a whitetail like James was. I'm something different, maybe some kind of gazelle?

I shake my head no at Ollie and try to reverse my partial on my own. It takes twice the time and the pain is barely tolerable, but I get back to myself. I got pretty far on my first try with most of the head and my arms starting to transform.

We break for dinner. Not surprisingly, it's pizza. Ollie explains that it's for the high carbs and the fat he needs during his training tomorrow. I recognize it for what it really is; a guy who's too lazy to cook.

It takes two more tries and even more pain, with the last time Ollie using the spell to help me back out of it, but on the fourth attempt I manage to break through and am now prancing around in Wood's living room. The different but same theme has continued. I'm not a large stag like James was. I'm sleeker and more compact. The antlers are single black curves that form an almost heart shape. My field of vision is enormous! It's at least two hundred and seventy degrees. I wish I had brought a zoology book so I could identify myself. I'll swing by the library in the morning.

I do a couple of more transformations and give Ollie the name of the best sourcebook James used to help him on his way towards becoming an Animagus. I leave telling him I'll see him at Puddlemere

tomorrow. I'll be stuck riding the Knight Bus for some time to come. It turns out Portkeys have become heavily restricted in the last decade and there's no Floo I know of with in twenty miles of my house. Well, there's one, but I know she's Dumbledore's watchdog and I'm not going there. That's the reason I go to the park each morning and summon the Knight Bus. I want to make sure it doesn't pass anywhere by my house of Arabella Figg's. Still, I've got the coin so it's no big deal.

Vernon and Petunia don't even acknowledge me when I walk in. I simply head upstairs and go to my room. The Hat and Ollie were getting along so well, I left it over at his house tonight.

Pronghorn – that's what I am. The second fastest mammal in the world and I have more staying power than a cheetah with a top speed around sixty miles per hour! How's that for 'built for speed'! I was wrong about the range of vision too - three hundred and twenty degrees! I damn near have eyes in the back of my head.

I suppose being a wolf, lion, or whatnot might be good, but this ranks rather high on the coolness meter.

The next day after sending Hedwig with a note apologizing to Katie for yesterday, I bug Ollie after their morning practice to help me find a deserted field somewhere where I can open up the throttle on my form. He ends up taking me to his parents' house since they're vacationing for the next couple of weeks. I get to run around his old practice pitch in the backyard.

Prongs can't touch the Pronghorn. I can't really jump for shit, but I can move! The grace is still there. It is part of what made James a great chaser, but the speed is addictive.

The tiny leaps that I am capable of are used for direction changes as I try to really get a feel for the maneuverability of my new form. The eyesight is fantastic. I ask Ollie to signal some plays from last year and run out probably a half a kilometer and can see him easily!

Ollie paces me from above on his broom. I can't hold top speed for that long, but around thirty mph is a 'cruising speed' that I feel like I could do all day! He pulls up alongside and casts a sticking charm on the Hat and slaps him on my back so it can enjoy the rush.

Whatever else I may be, I am speed and endurance personified and I know it's a hell of a rush!

The only thing that's disappointing is the horns. They're actually not antlers, but real horns that have a hollow hairy substance growing out of them. Only the sheath gets shed and not the entire thing. They're about eight inches long and mostly meant for defensive work, if I can't run away from something. It's not exactly intimidating like JP's massive rack, but I won't complain with this kind of acceleration.

One exhausting hour later, I have Ollie remove the Hat and finally change back. I'm covered in sweat, but it was some serious fun!

So that's pretty much how my next few weeks go. I hang out at Ollie's in the morning and after that he and I go train at Puddlemere and occasionally I get a chance to really break loose as 'Horny'. Damn Hat and his stupid nicknames! First HJ and now this!

In the evenings, I study from my Anybook and get into name calling matches with Hat. I breeze through my summer assignments. It's too bad James didn't save his schoolwork.

I've already begun the diagnostic charms to map out the wards on this hellhole I have to call home. From what I have seen, the wards charge rapidly for the first eight hours of the day slowly for the next two and almost not at all past that. So, as long as I spend eight hours here the wards get their charge. My Runes are good, but my Arithmancy is a joke. After checking my calculations and coming up with three different answers, I went with my most conservative guess. The wards should be as strong as they can be by August fifteenth. I'll give it until the seventeenth, but if I don't see any further change in

their strength, then I'm crashing on Ollie's couch or at the Burrow until school starts. I've had all I can stomach of the Dursleys.

Tonight, I'm a bit on the wary side. After Quidditch, we're heading over to Katie's house where I will be suitably 'surprised' by a birthday party. The Hat's convinced Ollie that Katie and I have something going on. After they both make some cradle robbing remarks, the prat goes behind my back and gets with her to set up this party. The fact that she agreed to it worries me. Lacking the time to come up with a suitable bit of revenge, Dobby's been told to short sheet his bed and put plastic wrap over the toilet.

Last year's team, Ron, Ginny and a few others are going to be there. Hermione won't. She's still on vacation with her parents. Tomorrow, everyone's going to see Ollie make his first start in the rings against Chudley of all teams! He used up almost half his personal allotment for tickets for the year, but it means a good deal to him.

I'm still a bit embarrassed to see Katie; we've exchanged a couple of owls. Mostly, I'm actually more nervous to see Ron. Six weeks ago, he was my best mate. Will I still be able to relate to him, or is going to be weird? Crap! Now, I have to bury this line of thought somewhere in my mind or the Hat will end up trying to come up with another bizarre name for me next time I put it on. Still no luck with the wandless silencing charms.

I did say my life is weird, didn't I?

Author's notes – Well, there you go. We're up to Harry Potter's birthday. Next chapter should take us to the Quidditch World Cup and perhaps the start of school. As to the great question of who is HJ, we may never know. He's certainly not going to go advertising his condition and he's going to be very careful who he tells.

Full discussion in my threads on DLP and Fanfictionauthors (both dot net). Hope to see you there.

Disclaimer - Still a work of fanfiction. I make nothing off of this, but I get to meet a bunch of really nice people.

Acknowledgements - The folks at AFC stopped me from making a hideous mistake with this chapter. Thankfully, no one will ever see that version. ZanyMuggle handled the Beta work on this chapter and it's being posted now, but I'm sending it off to FairyQilan for post beta work and when I get it back, I'll repost this chapter. No need to make you folks wait any longer.

Chapter 5 – Closets and Secrets

July 31, 1994

"Are you enjoying the party?"

"It's the best one I've ever had, Katie. Thanks for putting all this together." She doesn't need to know that it's the only one I've ever had in this lifetime. JP had one pretty much every year; she definitely doesn't need to know that!

"I'm glad you like it."

"It's surprising your parents didn't stay to chaperone. They don't know Fred and George are here, do they?"

"I might have neglected to mention them." She says tilting her head sideways and looking amused.

Katie looks nice, like she spent a good deal of time in front of the mirror today. That's not a good sign. I could be in trouble. Now, don't get me wrong. Katie is a very pretty fifteen-year-old girl. If I were a normal just turned fourteen-year-old boy, I'd be looking for ways to prevent her from beating me off with a stick.

I don't think my name and 'normal' are often used in a sentence together unless it's one like, 'Why can't you be normal?'

There's one sure fire way to tell if I'm in deep shit here or not, "I saw the cake when I was in the kitchen. It looks smashing! Did you do that?"

She smiles and adds with a giggle, "From scratch. I hope you like chocolate, though I was tempted to just have banana splits for everyone."

Yeah, I'm in it deep. I ignore the banana split comment realizing that I just lost a bet with the Hat, bloody effing piece of cloth! Damn thing will look for her mentioning banana splits the moment I put it on my head. Maybe I can get Ollie to Obliviate me.

"Who doesn't? I think I saw Ron drooling over it."

We both trade laughs and I scan the room while drinking some punch. Angelina and Alicia seem to be watching us carefully. Great, it's a conspiracy! The twins are watching Angelina and Alicia carefully, paying more attention to some parts than others. Down, boys! Ron and Lee are bothering Oliver about all things Quidditch-related and Ginny looks somewhat lonely and out of place, looking at the Sorting Hat suspiciously. It's a good guess that she's not in on it, but has pretty much figured out what's happening. I still can't believe Ollie went back to his flat and brought the damn Hat back! I sense another conspiracy.

Okay, so let's examine my options. Dating Katie probably isn't one of them. I could go out with her a couple of times and then give her the 'we're better as friends' speech. I could ignore all this and play like a dumb kid who just turned fourteen. That would play well into the 'I'm not ready for anything serious and this is your OWL year' maneuver. The one nice thing about having the memories of a man-whore in the noggin is remembering how many ways there are to avoid commitment. Sirius and James were quite good at it. Remus struggled, but mostly with his 'furry little problem'. Peter just struggled with his commitment to good hygiene.

I continue speaking merely to buy time as I move the conversation over towards the furniture. It's a sad reflection on me that I'm about to

'use' Ginny to prevent Katie from 'putting the moves' on me, but it's the best plan I have at the moment.

I sit down on the recliner vice putting myself between Ginny and Katie; after all, I have no desire to be either a rock or a hard place. "Hey Ginny, how are things? When's your birthday again? It's coming up soon right?"

Poor thing is probably shocked at me striking up a conversation with her. "The eleventh; are you coming to the Burrow this year?"

"If you're having a party, it only seems fair that I come to yours as well. I'm not really sure what my plans are. Wood over there gets a couple of tickets to the Quidditch Cup."

Ginny smiles, "Dad says he's got the inside track on some really good tickets and he'll know in a few days. Bill and Charlie are back home, Bill for good. I'd forgotten what a madhouse it is with all nine of us there."

I shudder comically at the thought of even more Weasleys under one roof. I love the place, but all those years under the cupboard listening to the occasional scratches of a rodent that found its way under the foundation are a far cry from the level of insanity at the Burrow.

Using my newfound – or is that newly rediscovered? – social skills, I manage to keep the two girls entertained without the managing to upset either of them. More people gravitate towards us and I'm safe for the moment.

"How about we play a game?" one of the twins comments. So much for being 'safe'.

"We could get our brooms and go flying," Ron offers. I'm surprised he didn't go for chess. He must really want to be a Keeper.

Katie shakes her head no, "Muggle neighbors. I always have to Floo over to Alicia's if I want to fly. I've got a couple of movies rented, but they're for later. We've got a badminton net set up in the back; it's an easy game to learn. What have you got in mind, Fred?"

I'm never quite sure how Katie or the other girls can tell the twins apart, other than which girl they stand next to. He chugs his butterbeer and lets out a manly belch. "I was thinking we could have a good old fashioned game of spin-the-bottle, in honor of the birthday boy. Mr. Wood, a silencing charm on the closet if you please."

Everyone laughs and warning bells start going off in my head. This has all the hallmarks of a setup. "What happens if you land on Ginny?"

"Code of the closet, me bucko – you just have to go in the closet for five minutes. I'd just tickle ickle Gin-Gin for the allotted time."

"Would that be before or after I knee you in the bludgers, oh brother of mine!" Ginny responds quickly, drawing copious laughter.

"Fine, suppose Ollie ends up with Ginny?" I watch the faces of every male Weasley redden. Ginny's does too, but from embarrassment. Ten galleons says that butterbeer bottle is charmed and if Ginny lands on anyone, it'll be me, right after Katie gets her shot. I could work a bit of wandless magic, but I could only summon the bottle towards me. I still don't have enough control over the banisher to not make it look obvious. With my luck, I'd turn it into a missile and injure someone.

"Then we'd expect Mr. Wood to behave himself." Fred said very slowly. Someone in the room is bound to have something charmed to control the bottle.

"Come on Harry. Give it a spin, birthday boy."

Resigned to my fate, I give the bottle a twirl on the table, while sneaking glances around the room. Fred and George are too obvious. Alicia's fiddling with a bracelet she's wearing. It's always the quiet ones, isn't it? Hey, there's a big surprise. It stops on Katie, who's blushing furiously. I stand up and offer her my hand. "Shall we?"

I lead her into the closet and we're shut in. There's a little light coming from the seams of the door. "Hello again."

She's awfully quiet. "Hi."

"Were you in on this?"

"What?"

"The charmed bottle?"

"How did you know?"

"Trade secret, I'm not at liberty to say, but don't let anyone know that I know. I intend to exact a bit of revenge." I lean in and give her a little peck. It's a nice little friendly kiss. It feels a bit on the awkward side, though. In five minutes, a teenaged JP could have had her knickers around her ankles. Instead, I plan to keep my hands right in the small of her back.

Despite my intentions, I find myself starting to relax and enjoy a good snog with Katie. I even give her a bit of tongue. She doesn't seem like she's very experienced; she gives a startled jump when my left hand drifts a little farther down than I intended. I let go immediately.

"Sorry." We both say at the same time and share a nervous laugh.

This isn't right. Katie is a 'good girl' and not a slag to be used by the likes of me. "What's wrong, Harry? You didn't like it?" Her voice rises a bit.

Just great! Say the wrong thing and she'll be balling her eyes out when they open the door. "No, it's not that. I liked it too much, I think, but I'm not sure I want to be that kind of guy." I silently add 'again'.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean I'm not sure I want to be a guy that goes into a closet with a girl for a snog for a party game. If I kiss a girl, I want there to be some real chemistry behind it."

She's quiet for a moment. "Wow! I never thought you'd be a romantic?" Can't fault her, Lily hadn't expected it either – of course JP was using that angle to get closer to her. I'm using it to buy myself a bit of distance.

"I'm full of surprises."

"You mean we don't have any chemistry?" Hey look, I'm back in the frying pan!

"Chemistry isn't running into a closet. Chemistry is a pair of friends hanging out and having fun before going further. Why don't we try that first?"

"I think I'd like that," she agrees finally. I breathe a sigh of relief.

"Course you're going to have to overlook my behavior the rest of today." I say with my best evil smile.

"Why's that?"

"I'm going to be teaching Fred and George a lesson in humility."

The door opens while she ponders that. Everyone in the room is strangely quiet. I wonder what's wrong now. Ron's missing.

"Alright, what is it?"

"Sorry, Harry. We didn't know."

"Know what?" I say to the twins. I scan the room and see Ollie's face is bright red. "What did you tell them?"

"It wasn't me!" Ollie protests. I round on the Hat. I know that look. Spend enough time around the thing and a person can pick up its expressions. It looks haughty and smug.

"What did you tell them?"

"I merely commented on the fact that during the summer you've shown no real attraction to any girls your age, but you've been spending all this time with Wood over there. I'm no expert in human sexual relations, but your actions indicate that you're more interested in males."

"You told them I'm a poof!"

"I told them nothing of the sort. I merely said that you might be confused after that time you walked in on the Weasley boy in the bathrooms. I also said that you would probably snog Bell to validate yourself before telling her the two of you should be friends and take it slow. Having a token girlfriend is a good way of keeping suspicion off of you. It's a good plan, Potter." I ignore Katie's horrified gasp, Ginny's shocked face, and the realization that Ron's probably somewhere hurling his lunch right now.

I could probably learn a thing or two from the Hat in humiliating someone. I could also torch it right now without a second thought. There's evil and then there is evil.

"It's making that up!"

"I thought you were past the denial stage, HJ."

"Knock it off, Hat. I am not gay."

"Anyone in this room ever see Potter kiss a girl before today? Wood? How about you? Ever see Potter checking out all those posters of witches on your walls? Didn't he make you dinner the other night?"

I scoop up the Hat and head back into the closet. "Excuse us for a minute!"

Back inside the silenced door, I hold it in front of my face. If I know Ollie, he's dispelling the silencing charm right now. I better not say anything to tip them off about my new memories. "What the hell are you doing?"

“Oh relax, Potter. You spend the last few days moaning about how you don’t want a bunch of teenaged girls coming on to you. I come up with a perfectly good way of preventing that and you suddenly act all angry!”

“And you decided telling them I’m bent is a better solution?”

“I was merely trying to help.”

“I don’t know how much more of your damn help I can take! Plus, I know you. You’re laughing your arse off.”

“I need entertainment too! I didn’t tell them anything that wasn’t true. Well, except for the part on walking in on Weasley – I just assumed living with each other for three school years that had to happen at some point.”

“Have you ever wondered why they never let you off probation?”

“I assumed it was because they were a bunch of self-righteous sacks of ass-spackle who couldn’t take a good joke.”

That is probably true. I hate to admit that a Marauder – or at least the memory of one – had just been taken down by a piece of cloth, but the analytical side of me knows that I am so thoroughly pranked that there is no course of action left on my part. If I ever get the chance, I’ll have to show Sirius the memory of this and let him howl in laughter. I take the Hat off.

“Well played, Hat. That’s a quality prank, if I’ve ever saw one.”

“Indeed, though I barely made an effort, HJ.”

“How long have you been planning this?”

“Since you made the comment about sticking me on the elf’s head. You may be able to make short work of all these humans, but I am in another league, Potter. You’d do well to remember that.”

“I’ll keep it in mind. Now can we go out there and salvage what little is left of my reputation?”

It laughs at me. “Why not, but I can see I already won the bet that Bell would bring up the banana splits.”

We step back out to find the room staring at us again. “I’m guessing you heard?” Heads nod. I smile at the Hat. “You’ve been locked up too long, Hat. You’re out of touch with how sneaky teenagers are these days.”

After the Hat ‘confesses’ to pranking me, things get better. Ron returns and a second confession is required. Finally, with that mess cleared up, we can resume the game.

The rules we are using say Katie now dictates who has to spin the next bottle. She chooses Alicia, whom I assume is going to use her bracelet to select George. Concentrating on my weak wandless summoner, I pull the tip of the bottle towards me.

“Me again! Are you sure this thing isn’t rigged? Well, come on, Spinnet. Guess I have to prove that I’m a guy and all that.”

The angry look on George’s face is worth it as I lead a dismayed Alicia off. The Hat is right – I can run rings around these people! Now normally I like Alicia, but involving herself in one of the Weasley twins’ pranks? Well, there’s a price to be paid for that foolishness. I ‘earn’ a couple of smacks for being excessively fresh and make certain to mess my hair up before coming out of the closet.

I choose my words carefully, “Honestly Alicia, I didn’t know you were ticklish there.” The look on her face is priceless – George’s too! It’s tempting for me to pick Angelina and complete my revenge, but instead, I pick Ollie. He first lands on Ron, but has to spin again until he gets a female. I notice Alicia isn’t using her bracelet. He ends up getting Katie. The game continues with the personal highlight of Ron stumbling out of the closet with a goofy grin on his face after being inside there with Angelina, who comes out rolling her eyes.

Eventually, I end up in the closet with a twelve soon-to-be thirteen-year-old Ginny Weasley. Now fifteen is at the bottom end of the range that I might consider acceptable. This just isn't!

"So what's new Ginny?" She's probably about to panic.

"Not much."

"You're nervous, relax."

"I'm not nervous!"

"The fact you are shouting it doesn't do much for supporting your argument."

"Quit teasing!"

"Sorry. Still, you should relax. Listen Ginny, you're a nice girl and we've never really talked about this crush you have on me. I'm flattered and, in a few years, I might be interested. Right now, I'm not interested in soulmates or fairy-tale love. I'm interested in hanging out with friends and having good times." I shake my head thinking how JP thought he had that at one point.

"What about Katie?" There's that Weasley bluntness I'm familiar with. It's probably her first real step towards treating me like I'm just some bloke instead of her knight in shining armor.

"I said we could hang out, have some laughs and see if there is any chemistry. I want friends not groupies. Let's start by being friends. Ron always says how you're fun to be around, but whenever I'm around you, it's like you've been hit with a confundus charm."

She starts to stammer a reply, but I just grab her and kiss her. Whatever happens next will probably infinitely more entertaining than what she was about to say as I smother her with a "Mummph!"

She squirms for a minute and then settles down. I let my guard down. After all, I don't know how serious she was about kneeing a bloke in

his bludgers. Not that it would shock anyone who knew my 'true' situation, but that had happened in the past – or should I say a past life?

I figure snogging her will either help her get out of this crush thing or it'll make it so she won't be able to be in the same room with me. Despite the fact that she's a year younger than this body, it does still feel a bit squicky. She doesn't have to know how much the low lighting is helping me out here.

Breaking it off after thirty seconds, I say, "See, nothing to it – two friends and a quick snog. Wanna have another go? It'd be a shame to waste the rest of our time in here?"

She nods and we kiss a bit more. Whoa, watch that tongue there, little miss! I break away again, "I reckon one of your brothers is going to throw the door open early."

"You should hold on the door shut and when they cancel the silencing charm, I'll yell that I need a minute to get my clothes back on?" Give Ginny some credit. She's a devious one.

I laugh. "I've got my wand, but I don't think Madame Hopkirk would consider fighting my way out of a closet 'reasonable', but that's about as close as I'd like to get to life threatening this year."

We exit to less wolf whistles and more questioning glares than I would have liked, I know I haven't killed the crush for good, but maybe I made a dent in it. Now I just need to see how good a kisser Angelina is.

The next day, I'm sitting in Puddlemere's stands watching Ollie make his debut. He's let a few get by that I thought he should have had, but he's holding his own. I'm sharing my Omnioculars with pretty much everybody, while all of us are commenting on the chaser play.

"I figured you'd be watching the Seekers, Harry?"

“Seeking is pretty easy, unless they’re trying to impede play or really go after each other. Puddlemere’s third string is Donna Livingston. She’s a speed and finesse player not an overly aggressive player. I’ve seen her enough to know that she’ll rely on her speed to make the catch. It’s all a matter of evading and knowing when to feint and how much you’re going to sell the feint. Chudley’s seeker isn’t worth wasting my time on. Diggory and maybe even Chang are better than him.”

“What about Malfoy?” Angelina asks, searching for a sore spot from her seat at the other end of the aisle. She’s just mad that my hand ‘slipped’ under the fabric of her skirt yesterday and she came out of the closet with a bit of undergarment showing. Fred still hasn’t spoken to me. I’ll probably let him prank me at some point when he calms down.

“If he flew as well as he ran his mouth, he’d be the best Seeker in Europe. I’ll pay a lot more attention to Lynch and Krum at the cup. Lynch is a veteran, but Krum’s a prodigy from what I hear.”

I excuse myself and head to the concession stands and to use the loo. I figure I’ll give Ron and Ginny some early presents and pick them up a set of Omnioculars. Ron’s a bit weird when it comes to gifts, but anything Quidditch related is always accepted. If I picked up one for Hermione, she’d want to record lessons so she could watch them later and be disappointed that only the professional models hold more than ten minutes of footage. I examine the possibility of laying my hand on a pensieve at some point. Those things aren’t cheap. It’d clean out my trust vault.

As I walk onto the mezzanine, I spot a pretty looking witch with brown hair leaning against the wall with a quill scribbling and a furrowed brow. I also happen to recognize her.

“Penelope Clearwater, it’s nice to see you again. What are you doing?” Ginny mentioned that she gave Percy the heave ho at the party yesterday for apparently paying more attention to his new job over his longtime girlfriend.

“Hello Harry. I’m doing a freelance piece for Teen Witch Weekly on Quidditch and other male obsessions that can ruin relationships.”

No bitterness there. “Trying to make a go as a journalist? Good luck with that. Well it’s been good seeing you.”

“Hey, Harry!”

“You know what would land me a full time job with them?” She’s got a gleam in her eyes.

I know the answer already, “An exclusive with Harry Potter? I don’t know ...”

“Please Harry!”

“How about I give you a few quotes for the obsession piece?”

“An exclusive would get my story on the cover ... wouldn’t you rather your first time with the press be with a harmless little Teen Witch Weekly reporter, or those nasty folks at the Prophet?” She gives a little mock pout and a little smile. It occurs to me that Penelope is quite attractive, though the idea of Percy’s sloppy seconds doesn’t really appeal to me. Then again, Percy’s probably one of those straight and narrow ‘saving it for my wedding day types’. Sirius had a saying, ‘Don’t worry where the broom’s been, or who might have rode it before – just take it for a spin!’

I can’t help myself. The setup is just too inviting. “I could see my first time being with you.”

Clearwater gasps and blushes brightly, “You naughty little flirt!”

“Well, you were the one mentioning first times. Besides, there is no such thing as a ‘harmless reporter’. I’m here with my friends, but we could meet up after the game?” Ollie will be doing post-game stuff for a while. I could take her back to his flat and see where this might lead. Maybe it’s all the snogging from yesterday, or maybe it’s just a little teenaged hormone-fueled desperation seeping through, but I’m getting a vibe off of the ex-Ravenclaw in front of me.

I scribble Ollie's Floo address onto her sheet and tell her to meet me there one hour after the game.

A few hours later, I'm answering questions from Penny on Oliver's couch. She seems to prefer that these days to Penelope. After learning what her favorite dish was, I've got Dobby working on a Beef Wellington, after Dobby returned a slightly irate Hat back to Number Four. As tempting as it was to cook for her myself, I figured that would be too obvious. She's eighteen and I'm fourteen, at least physically.

The secret rests in trying to get her to think that this is her idea. "Okay, what's your next question?"

"If you could ask your parents one question, what would it be?"

"That's a mighty personal question, Penny. I'm not sure I should answer that."

"Sorry Harry. I didn't know it would upset you."

"It didn't upset me, but how about we trade questions. I'll answer one if you answer one for me."

She looks nervous and I begin to wonder if she has the stomach for the field. "I suppose."

"What would I ask my parents? I guess I'd ask them if they're proud of me. My turn, what did you see in Percy?"

"Gah! Why did you have to ask that? He's a driven bloke and I found that attractive in school. Okay, here's a lighter question – any special girl in your life?"

"I have many friends who are girls, but no girlfriends. My turn, what do you look for in a guy?"

“Harry!”

“Hey! That’s my name. You look for me in a guy. I’m flattered. Congratulations, you found me!”

“Harry! You’re shameless!” She’s smiling though. “I look for a nice guy who is considerate and thoughtful.”

Our banter is interrupted by Dobby announcing that dinner s ready. We eat and chat. She asks me about what I hope to do after Hogwarts? After talking about my Quidditch aspirations, we talk about being paralyzed by the Basilisk. That leads to fighting against the Basilisk.

“Tell me about Sirius Black?”

“No. We can’t go there.” Dumbledore is supposed to be exerting pressure behind the scenes. “I’ll just say I truly hope he gets justice. Now, how about telling me something about Penny?”

She looks down at her plate. “I haven’t told anyone this before. I found out last year that I’m not a Muggleborn.”

“Really?”

“Yes.”

“Were you adopted?”

“No, I was interning at the Ministry and I checked my records. I found out real father is Antonin Dolohov. I guess you know who he is?”

“Yes, I do. Are you okay?”

“Mum doesn’t even know, so I’m betting he bewitched her at some point. You’re the only person I’ve ever told. I thought about going to see him, but got cold feet.”

We move back to the couch and keep talking. She’s sitting a little closer.

“Hermione said that her arm was sore for months after she was paralyzed. Did you have that problem too?”

Penny sighed. “I was crouched over and staring in a hand mirror. My lower back hasn’t felt right since. I even go to see a Chiropractor. He thinks I was in a traffic accident.”

Sensing my opening, I pounce. “I’ve learned a thing or two about massaging from my time on the pitch. Ollie’s got some ointment if you’d like a back massage.”

She’s weighing over my offer and smiling when the Floo comes to life an Ollie stumbles out – wrapped only in a towel.

“Holy shit! Harry! Penelope? What the hell’s going on here?”

“Holy shit yourself, mate! Where are your clothes?”

“I got initiated tonight. Had to run laps around the pitch stark naked. They left and neglected to tell me where my clothes and wand had gone. The changing room had a locking charm on it.”

Ollie’s in damn good shape and the way Penny’s eyeing him up means my window of opportunity just closed. “Hello Oliver. I’m getting an interview from Harry to hopefully make my debut as a journalist. Congratulations on your first professional win.”

He smiles good-naturedly and excuses himself to go put on some clothes. When he returns, it has an even worse effect on Penny. He’s in a pair of shorts and one of those little tank top muscle shirts. I’d almost swear she was about to go get the sauce left over from dinner and baste him in it.

Within thirty minutes, Penny has ‘enough’ on me for her story. She’s developed her own little Quidditch obsession with Oliver and is already asking him questions for her original story. I know when I’m odd man out. Lord only knows how many times Sirius would do the same thing to JP. JP had the looks, but Sirius had that whole rebel against his family dangerous type of guy thing that made the females

swoon. I get a grateful hug and a chaste peck on the cheek for my reward as I head off to catch the Knight Bus back for my lockdown. The only 'action' I will be getting tonight will involve the Hat mocking me.

It comes as no surprise in the morning when I arrive that I find Penny's clothes scattered around the couch. It's time for a bit of payback.

"Ollie! Practice in ten minutes. Shake a leg!"

I enjoy hearing the cursing going on in the room and a thump of someone falling onto the floor. He really has thirty minutes, but he'll figure that out any second now.

"Harry! Practice doesn't start until nine thirty!"

"Sorry mate! My mistake, but you really should get there early the day after your first win. You still have to find your wand and clothes."

"Right, can you give me a minute?"

"No problem. Would you like me to send Dobby in with all these extra clothes that seem to have appeared around the couch?"

"Err yes, that'll work." I point to the elf and feeling a bit evil, I also hand him the Sorting Hat.

"That's a nice tan line you have there, Clearwater. You're a bit furry though, I'd consider shaving, if I were you."

A shriek is followed a panicked looking Dobby reappearing in the living room with the laughing Hat. Over top of the hissing of an angry female I call out, "Sorry about that. I didn't think Dobby would bring the Hat as well."

Two minutes later, there is a rather loud crack and I hope that Penny didn't splinch herself leaving as Ollie comes out. "That was low, Harry, but I'm in a good mood this morning, so I'll let it pass."

"I was this close to her letting me give her a backrub and you come stumbling in with a towel on."

"Oh come on! She wasn't going to go for it, no matter how hard you tried and you know it. There was no sense in letting her go to waste though."

There's only one thing worse than pushing a guy to the side and 'stealing the deal' with the bird I'd spent two hours chatting up: gloating about it. "I got four words for you, Ollie 'Percy Weasley's Sloppy Seconds.' Now come on, lover boy. You've got ten minutes to get your tighty-whiteys unstuck from the scoreboard at the practice facility; otherwise the coaches will make you leave them up there all day."

I watch him cringe at Percy's name before he looks serious. "How do you know that?"

"Who do you think gave them the idea?"

August 11th, 1994

Days pass as I keep up my regimen of training and practice. My wandless summoner is getting better. The stunner's still useless, but then again, the most JP ever really managed was a knocking out chickens with it. I overdid my workout last night and had a strange dream with Wormtail and Riddle in it. Some other guy was there. He looked familiar, but he was too hazy to get a good look at.

Ollie and Penny are becoming quite an item. She even apologized to me for giving me the impression that she was leading me on. It wouldn't have been so bad if she hadn't patted me on the head after saying it. Her story made the cover as predicted. All in all, it's a nice piece devoid of the horrid reporting in the Prophet.

I tumble out of the Floo at the Burrow for Ginny's birthday. I picked her up some chocolates, since I'd already brought her and Ron a pair of Omnioculars. Ginny's sent me a few owls since my birthday. It almost looks like she's trying really hard to be normal. Did my stunt in the closet make things worse?

A mass of brown hair impedes my progress, "Hi Hermione. Good to see you. How was your summer vacation?"

She gives me one of those crushing hugs. Lugging a book satchel around all the time has done wonders for her upper arm strength. "It was brilliant! I would have sent you a letter by post, but I doubted your guardians would give it to you. I hear you've been busy."

"I brought a gift for you too, since you're obviously done with your summer assignments." I pull a wrapped gift out of my bag as she crinkles her nose at my gentle ribbing.

"Occlumency: Defending Your Mind, I think I remember reading something about it before. It's the counter to Legilimency isn't it? Thank you so much!" She pulls me into another hug, but uses it as an excuse to whisper, "Why do you think we'll need it?"

"I figured out both Snape and Dumbledore are Legilimens. Plus if they sick bounty hunters on Sirius, someone might try and use it against us. I've already been through it and have the basics down. We've got secrets to protect now." My lie is only a slight one; I'm a bit beyond the basics. JP went through it as part of his dueling training. The eyes of an opponent can reveal so much about their next move.

"Oh right you are! Good show."

Besides, it gives her an extra project that will take away from time she might spend noticing differences in me. If she does figure it out, then I'm already one step ahead of the game where she's on the road to learning it.

One look at Ginny tells me that I probably messed up. She's wearing her long hair pulled up into a bun with a skirt and blouse. It's the new

mature look for the now teenaged Ginny Weasley. I can't imagine what's brought on this change. Though I have to concede, she did a nice job with the makeup.

I greet her with a hug and she gives me a quick kiss on the lips. After that, I get introduced to the disapproving stares attached to Bill and Charlie Weasley. James actually met a very young Bill long ago. They seem like decent enough blokes, though a tad on the frosty side towards little old me, yet I have no idea why?

I meet that odd little blonde girl from Ravenclaw that Ginny hangs around with. She's a bit on the eccentric side, but good for a chuckle. Percy's at the table reading through documents concerning proper cauldron thickness – how very exciting. It startles me how low the suicide rate amongst Ministry workers is. Thanks to the Potter family holdings, I won't ever have to worry about that!

Molly Weasley sees me and stops her cooking long enough to start fussing over me. "Harry! I was worried those awful Muggles wouldn't let you come. You still look a bit thin, but at least they're feeding you."

I thank her and neglect to correct her about the arrangement I have with my relatives. I also neglect to mention that in a week, I'll be camped out on Ollie's couch for the rest of the summer. Minutes later, she's shooing Percy and all his clutter from the table as we prepare for lunch.

Fred and George are still a bit on the cold side towards me. I'll have to be careful what I eat today. Quite frankly, they aren't nearly as good at taking it as they seem to be at giving it. True I did snog both their girlfriends and their sister, but I didn't start it. Thankfully, the Hat didn't make this particular outing as the twins start ribbing me about Penny's article.

"I do believe we need to get our copies autographed."

"But brother, we don't have any copies."

"I do believe our sister has a few to spare."

Ginny rolls her eyes. "Mum forgot that I already had a subscription and Luna brought all the rest."

The young witch with the large blue eyes smiles. "Seven has always been a magically significant number. So many rituals involve the number seven, but there are only four that involve fungus."

All conversation grinds to a halt. I have to keep this girl around; she's a riot! For a moment, no one knows what to say. Considering I only know of two fungus rituals, I'm almost tempted to ask.

"That was a very nice article Percy's girlfriend wrote." Molly says restarting the chatter. She turns to look at her son. "She didn't happen to mention the letter I sent congratulating her?" Percy shakes his head. Apparently, he's neglected to mention the breakup to his Mum.

"I thought you two broke up?" Bill says.

Percy responds indignantly, "We're just taking some time off. Once we're both settled into our careers, I confident that we'll start anew."

I have to hold my tongue to prevent myself from mentioning that I saw Penny reading Molly's congratulatory note at Ollie's table while sitting in his lap and feeding him breakfast. Percy would have been the one person more disgusted than I was at the scene.

Ginny, on the other hand, has done a complete one-eighty. She's gone from wallflower to Lavender Brown clone, and, from the looks I'm getting as she spoons food onto my plate, I'm not the only guy in the room disturbed by this. Even Hermione looks a bit put off by Ginny's newfound attitude.

Talk turns to something special going on at Hogwarts this year. The oldest Weasleys all share a smile as both Bill and Charlie say they wish they were still in school. Between their little 'It's a big secret and you'll just have to wait and see' act and Ginny's attempt at exiting teenaged life after only a few hours, my nerves are starting to fray. Even Percy the human sphincter chuckles about how busy the Head

Boy and Girl this year are going to be proving like most secrets in the Magical World, most everyone is in on it but me.

“Alright, out with it!”

“What?” Charlie says probably resenting my tone.

“Are you going to tell us, or are you just going to keep taunting us?”

“Oh ickle Harry’s got his knickers in a twist.”

“Boys. Enough!”

“Let me put it like this. Every year I’ve been at that school, things have tried to kill me. So, if something out of the ordinary is happening, I’d appreciate a heads up.”

“Easy there Harry...”

“Considering both your brother and sister have been around when things start have gotten sticky, you might want to rethink this little secret everyone seems to be in on!” I don’t show my temper all that often, but I do have one.

I guess I’m pretty good at this whole conversation-killing thing as well. It almost makes me wish I brought the Hat.

Bill looks rather cross at me. “I think you’d best mind you manners and remember where you are, young man.”

I grab for a tight reign on my temper. My response is as calm and even as I can make it. “Fine Bill, you don’t have to tell me. Just remember that I asked.” I stand and look at Ginny. “My apologies, I’m going to step outside and get some air.”

I walk down towards the dock. It’s tempting to just leave. I hate secrets. Secrets killed James and Lily. Secrets kept Harry from knowing anything about his parents or the Magical world. Secrets have me trying and failing to act like a teenager who isn’t destined to fight a Dark Lord. Secrets aren’t good things. The folks in there don’t

understand. Then again, these prats don't know how much I loathe secrets.

Skipping a few stones across the surface of the water, I focus on my Occlumency to try and calm myself. From their perspective, I probably look like the prat to end all prats right about now.

There's a pop of an Apparition behind me and I glance over my shoulder and take my hand away from my wand. No, I'm not on pins and needles lately, am I? Who doesn't like dreaming about a fetus-like Dark Lord?

"Hello, Harry."

"Mr. Weasley."

"I had to finish up some things at the office and just got back to find the party isn't quite the joyous event I'd imagined. My supposedly grown up daughter is barricaded in her room and my wife is being less than charitable with my three oldest sons right now. She stopped Bill and Charlie from coming out here and hexing you, though my guess is that it's a smokescreen for the twins who went up to their room to concoct whatever punishment they feel you warrant. They seem to have a bit of a grudge when it comes to you lately. Care to explain what's going on?"

"This so called secret everyone seems to know about, that's what's going on. Everyone's always keeping secrets from me and telling me it's for my own good. Just look at last year when everyone was trying to keep me in the dark about Sirius."

"This one's a good thing, Harry. If I thought it would endanger you, I'd tell you. You have my word. Now what else is bothering you?" Arthur's a perceptive man. Most assume he's a hen pecked husband, but he's obviously had enough practice dealing with angry teenagers.

"Riddle's out there. He's trying to find a way back to life and now Pettigrew is helping him."

“Yes, Ron told me that you heard a prediction from your Divination Professor, definitely troubling.”

“It’s like you said about the twins. Riddle could use this big surprise as a smokescreen to hide whatever he is doing.” I opt to keep my dreams and visions to myself, besides Dumbledore said it himself. No one really believes a teenager.

“Well that true, but I know that Dumbledore is always keeping an ear to the ground. In the meantime, we shouldn’t ignore the threat, but we shouldn’t let it dominate our lives. We need to live and enjoy the good in our lives. Now, shall we go rejoin the party so that my daughter can convince you how mature she has become and her brothers can give you more disapproving glares?”

I smile at him ruefully, “Is this the part I’m supposed to be enjoying?”

“Well, maybe not this part, but then again, you reap what you sow and Ginny hasn’t been acting normal since your birthday party.”

“You do know that the twins charmed the butterbeer bottle.”

“I’d be more shocked if they didn’t, but once in the closet you made the decision to kiss her. I suppose I should be the stern parent at this point and ask you about your intentions towards her, but I think you’ve had enough posturing from the men in my family for one day and I’m reminded that you risked your life to save her. That alone entitles you to some leeway. I would only ask that you not intentionally hurt her.”

“Honestly sir, I don’t want to be anything more than her friend. I kissed her hoping that reality would help get her past the crush she has on me and to a point where she’s her real self around me. It seems I don’t understand teenage girls as well as I thought I did?”

“There’s a support group for those who don’t understand anything female, I believe its membership is roughly half the population of this world. Come on, we’re at about the ten minute point and Molly should be just about winding down. If you stay reasonably close to me for the rest of the day that should keep Fred and George away and ensure

that Ginny enjoys the rest of her special day. You will have to apologize to her again, though I'd ask you to merely focus on the actions of her brothers and leave out your concerns about Dark Wizards. Given what happened to her, I'd rather not have her more upset than she already is."

"I understand perfectly. Thanks." I doubt that James would ever have been that mature, if the Potter's had a daughter. We head back towards the Burrow and I go to face the results of my actions.

I'm sure it wasn't Ginny's best birthday ever, but it did at least get better after I returned and apologized to her for my rudeness. I stumble out of Ollie's fireplace and have to crawl to the couch. Someone was nice enough to get me with a Jellylegs jinx right as I was leaving. As if I don't have enough trouble with Floo travel already! Arthur had probably left on purpose to give his boys an opportunity to do something quick and without much thought, as a means of keeping things from escalating. It was a silent one so my guess is Bill or Charlie.

The minor hex should wear off in a few minutes. I wandlessly summon the Hat from across the room. He always enjoys me embarrassing myself and until my legs go back to normal, I've got nothing better to do. I slide it on top of my head and palm a few of the sweets that mysteriously found their way into my pockets probably through a switching spell. Gosh, should I eat one? No, but Ollie should!

'Oh well played HJ! You managed to get virtually every Weasley with a pecker angry at you. You have talent! So, there's a big secret, eh? Let's go to St. Mungo's, HJ. There's a painting there that also hangs in Dumbledore's office. I've got enough dirt on Dilys Derwent that her portrait will tell us what's going on, if she knows what's good for her. We can go visit the Longbottoms.'

'Frank and Alice are alive!' I had assumed they were dead when I realized that Neville lived with his Grandmum. Frank used to swear

that woman was trying to run his life. It's the best news I've heard in a long time.

'In the physical sense yes, but they were tortured into insanity. For what it's worth, the ones who did it are either dead or in Azkaban. I'm sorry, HJ.' I'm so crushed by the news, that I almost miss the sincerity in the Hat's apology.

Hat quickly changes the subject. 'I'm a bit surprised at Bill though, I would have expected that anal-retentive little wanker Percy to be the one to snap at you. You should have mentioned Clearwater and Wood's antics on the way out.'

It takes me a moment to clear the cobwebs out of my head. 'I heard that Bill's a bit over-protective of Ginny. My guess is he doesn't approve of his baby sister's new changes and blames me.'

'You had to go and kiss the girl.'

'I know! Not my brightest move, but what's done is done.'

'You could always memory charm her, wouldn't be the first time a Marauder's done that now would it?'

'You know that wasn't me and I didn't approve of Sirius doing it when I heard about it!'

'Then perhaps James shouldn't have arranged a secret, masked broom closet rendezvous with that Slytherin girl he loathed. That's always the problem when you prank someone, isn't it? What happens when things go wrong?'

I stand in the lobby at St. Mungo's listening to the Hat whisper some threatening words to a portrait of a famous witch. They involve a female reporter and the Hat's recollection that Derwent stole the formula for the bone regeneration potion from a Polish wizard. For an enchanted piece of cloth, it's quite intimidating. Minutes later, I have

my answer and go to pay my respects to a pair of lost souls the Hat reminded me about.

“So that’s what’s going on. They’re hosting the Triwizard Tournament this year. I don’t know what they’re thinking? I remember reading about it and people have died during those things! Don’t worry, I’ll keep a close eye on Neville this year and try to keep him on the straight and narrow.”

Alice continues to stare at me and chew her gum open mouthed. Frank’s just looking at the floor. I feel deflated and bitter seeing the fate of two people James Potter remembered so fondly. That ponce Lockhart deserves to be over there playing with his crayons, but not these two. The Hat is respectfully silent during all this.

In comparison their sacrifice was even greater then the Potters. Laying down your life is one thing, but giving up your sanity. I hope the Lestranges are screaming in agony right now. Maybe one day they’ll come back. James should have trusted these people with their lives, but he didn’t for fear if they had to choose between Neville and Harry, they’d do exactly what James feared he might have done had they trusted him.

Provided I’m not fighting for my life this year or something else stupid comes along, Neville’s my new kid brother. I know the Longbottoms would have done it for me.

Life has gotten a bit better. No more nasty dreams have shown up. Ginny’s becoming more ‘tolerable’, although the day after I had lunch with Katie, she insisted that we needed to go eat sometime. It does feel strange to have two girls competing over who can be closest without really dating me. Well at least if I allow this silly ‘not dating me’ thing to continue, I can use it to keep the rest of the schoolgirls away for now.

On the way out of St. Mungo’s, I bumped into Dung Fletcher faking an injury and trying to get some free pain potions. A galleon or three might have changed hands and he’s keeping an eye out for any

Pensieves that might be had for a decent price, so long as I don't want to ask too many questions about where it came from.

Two days after the wards stopped charging, I left the Dursleys with a cheery 'see you next summer.' For now my protection is more important than the ill will I have for them.

After all, it's not like I haven't be practically living with Ollie for weeks now. Although he was a bit angry with me for laughing while he tried to figure out how to shrink his tongue after eating one of my mysterious candies that I left on the counter. Fortunately, Penny was there to counter the charm, but had to struggle through her own stammering blushes as the Hat commented on what Oliver could possibly do with the enlarged tongue. Some of the ideas were a bit twisted even for it.

If I increase the magnification on my Omnis, I can see the Weasleys and Hermione up in the VIP seats with the Ministers and the Malfoys. Krum just ran Lynch into the ground for a second time. He's in a bad way. If I were Ireland's coach, I'd bring in their backup and have him pester Krum while the Chasers run up the score.

I can't say that I'd rather be there with Hermione and Ron instead of here in the mass of people next to Ollie. I feel like I can blend in here. Fortunately, Penny had her own ticket courtesy of Teen Witch Weekly. Ron was a bit put off that I had my own ticket already, but that allowed Charlie to go.

I haven't seen that many people I recognized – one of the Patil twins passed by at the concession stand. It was probably Padma. Parvati generally has a less serious look on her face.

The Veelas were a bit over the top. I fought the urges off, but caught Ollie starting to flex his muscles. A few fistfights broke out in the crowd during the sudden surge of testosterone. Several wands were drawn, but the blokes doing security pulled their heads out of their bungholes and broke it up.

Just what did they think would happen, letting an entire flock of Veela loose on a crowd that has been drinking and partying for the last two days? Of all the stupid idiotic things!

Play resumes after the rather amusing display between the Veelas and the Leprechauns. I can sense the frantic pace of the match building. It's Krum versus Ireland's Chasers, who are pouring on the points. The rest of the Bulgarian team has been reduced to mere spectators as I ignore Ollie screaming 'Did you see that?' after the Irish Keeper stymies the Bulgarians again.

That's the problem with having a team that's 'just good enough' for your star to carry you. They made it here as a one-trick hippogriff – Krum or bust – and that trick's not enough for the Irish.

'No way the Bulgarians can pull it out now, Hat.'

'I agree. Krum is the best I've seen in several life times. The rest of them might as well be holding his dick when he pisses.'

'In a few years, I might just see how I stack up against him.'

'Let me know so I can pickup some money betting against you.'

'Thanks for the vote of support. You've really grown on me this summer, like some kind of festering sore that I can't get rid of.'

'Oddly, it's not the first time someone has said something like that to me.'

'Have you finished your opening song yet?'

'There once was a witch from Nantucket ...'

'You might not want to go with that one. It's funny as hell, but you should remember the children.'

'You're right! That's what's been missing! I can make her a pedophile in addition to the necrophilia? That would cover the children, rather nicely!'

‘Oh, in that case, you should definitely use that one!’ I’ll be the only person at the welcoming feast with a pair of Omnioculars.

I smile as Viktor pounces on the Snitch in a losing effort. There’s no ‘I’ in ‘Team’, but there are several of them in ‘I was on the team that didn’t win the Quidditch World Cup’. Maybe, I’m a tad jealous of a player who is a cut above my level of play? Nah, not me!

I get another treat recording Ron as the teams head to the VIP box. He looks like he’s going to pee! The thirty seconds of game footage that I erase isn’t worth nearly as much as Ron looking like a fangirl. It would be worth paying the money for the image to be extracted and turned into a poster!

Too bad the idiots conducting this circus won’t drop the anti-Apparition wards. I could convince Ollie to sidealong me back to our small two-man tent. We stopped by and saw the Weasleys, but staying there would be an invitation for more attention from Ginny and her brothers. Right now, I’m not sure which would’ve been worse. Plus Ollie brought two bottles of scotch with him. We’ve still got almost a full bottle left and it would be a shame to let it go to waste while we wait for a Portkey back to London.

Ollie slips off to go find Penny leaving me with the task of breaking down the tent. Sure, leave it to the guy who can’t use magic! I eye the remaining bottle of scotch and look over at that tent with a trio of New Salem graduates.

‘You don’t have a chance in hell, HJ.’

‘I could probably pass myself off as a youngish seventeen especially after they had a few. I should really mix up a few aging potions.’

‘You’ll need a bottle for each of them if you want to pull that off.’

Scooping up the bottle, I start towards over towards the young women. They’re not looking at me, but pointing over my shoulder. There’s bunch of yelling. Did everyone realize the Leprechaun gold just vanished? Maybe a big fight broke out?

Turning, I look and see the source as people start screaming and pushing each other in a panic. I see Death Eaters floating a group of helpless people through the crowd hurling spells, but not really trying to hit anyone.

‘Well Potter, are you going to run like all these other useless tits?’

I drop a disillusionment charm on myself. Somewhere in London and owl is probably taking off. Although, with the amount of magic being tossed around, the area’s probably saturated already. ‘No chance in hell! I’m going to flip you around. Keep an eye on my back. They could be a bunch of idiots thinking inciting a riot is fun, but if they’re real, they’ll split off into smaller groups in a minute. I’ll dodge along the tree line and try and catch a straggler or two and find out who they are. I’ll hit them hard and fast. Let’s see what Hopkirk thinks is reasonable right about now!’

Author’s Notes - Five chapters down and I’m on the last day of summer! Considering it took me 17 chapters in Bungle and around 30 in Darkness to cover that same amount of time, it’s a friggin miracle! I suppose I’ll have to write a Sorting Hat song. Though I doubt I’ll use the lyrics mentioned in this chapter. Thanks for reading. Jim

Disclaimer – Still don't own Harry Potter and making no money off of this.

Acknowledgements – As always a big thanks to Alpha Fight Club for helping me iron out the issues.

Changes you may notice from Canon – The GoF timeline on seems off. It has September 1st on a Monday, when in fact the actual calendar was Thursday. I also opted to make the World Cup the night before returning to school. The Disillusionment charm has been made substantially inferior to an invisibility cloak.

Chapter 6 – Plans are Subject to Change

Wednesday August 31st, 1994

Disillusionment charms don't have the longest shelf life – a couple of minutes max. Certain spells and devices can defeat the charm and there's also a 'dead' time before I can reapply it. It's the reason people covet invisibility cloaks. Mine just happens to be in Ollie's flat. Fat lot of good it does me there! Listening to the screams and dodging the few remaining people fleeing into the woods, I weave my way through the rows of burning tents, some of them spilling their contents out onto the ground as the magically folded space inside them gives way. This can work to my advantage. I need to get closer to see what this group of 'Death Eaters' is doing.

'Flatten out, HJ! They could still see the distortion patterns! Watch for stray spells!' The Hat sounds like it's a little panicked.

'Buck up mate! When's the last time you saw any combat? You did say you wanted some excitement this summer.'

'The Headmaster's office is looking better all of the sudden. It's been over five hundred years since I was in danger.'

'I seem to recall you, me, and the mother of all serpents a couple of years ago.' They're still not breaking up! Maybe they're just a bunch of hooligans inciting a riot?

‘That was just you. What would a Basilisk possibly do with me?’

‘Remind me later and I’ll answer that question. Looks like they’ve got the Muggles who were in charge of the campground. It’s always nice to see people picking on the defenseless. Come on, break up! There! Looks like some of them are splitting off and looking for some plunder. I’m going to circle left.’

Swiftly moving through the debris, I spot the duo summoning brooms and trunks from the wreckage. Death Eaters? I still don’t know, but petty thieves at the very least. Piss on them! I banish a burning wagon right at them. One spots it and dives to the side. The other gets buried along with the pilfered goods in his hands.

“Telum Glacis!” The one diving out of the way sends a spear of ice right at me. Okay, kid gloves are off. I dodge the ice javelin and whip a fast bludgeoner back towards the Death Eater. He’ll shield it – no doubt, but this is a combo move. Swirling my wand and chanting in Latin, I gesture at the shattered barrel next to the man trying to cast his next spell.

James Potter was rather good at charms, hexes and jinxes, but he had been excellent at Transfiguration. Ever since I sorted out the whole James left-handed and me right-handed thing, I’ve been waiting to really cut loose. Dobby, the maniacal elf, can only shroud so much magic and only the most rudimentary Transfiguration and Conjunction is beyond his capacity to conceal.

Morphing into a large, wooden claw the animated barrel leaps at the Death Eater. Dueling with Transfiguration is about using your surroundings and the underlying principle of C.A.T.S. – Conjure, Animate, Transfigure, and Succeed. On the dueling platform empty of debris, it requires a fighter to begin to litter – typically using rope or chain link conjurations. If your opponent is foolish enough to allow the debris to accumulate, that’s when they really get into trouble.

On a battlefield filled with flotsam and jetsam, a person well-grounded in the subtle art of Transfiguration and Animation can be a rather nasty opponent. Transfiguration over a distance requires control, power and focus. I’ve got the power and it’s amazing what a bit of

adrenaline can do for focus. Control is a bit off and the claw isn't nearly as well-defined as I'd like, but I'm not about to complain. My opponent struggles with the barrel claw for a brief second until my second stunner catches him in the face. He was thrashing too much for the first one to get him.

In the sky above, someone's set off the Dark Mark. Not a good sign. I would curse myself for allowing that sight to distract me, but someone else beat me to it. I suppose there's a lesson to be learned in all this – when burying a person under a burning object, don't expect them to stay down or be terribly pleased with you afterwards. I eat a fairly hefty bludgeoner that tosses me onto one of the few still standing tents. All my breath comes rushing out and Hat goes flying off my head. I flail breathing raggedly, momentarily tangled in the fabric trying to raise a shield, but a disarming charm hits, separating me from my wand.

Clutching my bruised side, and hoping the damage isn't too severe, I burrow my way out from under the tent and see the second Death Eater towering above me. Portions of his robe are still smoldering. My wand held like a trophy in his hand.

"Of all the people for me to come across – the famous Harry Potter What a stroke of luck! So eager to play with the adults already, but we don't have much time, so I'll be brief – Crucio!"

Raw pain courses through my body. Screaming, I collapse face down into the dirt. I feel the extra pain of a metal tent spike gouging my leg. He holds it for what seems like an eternity, but was probably only five seconds. "Look at the helpless little hero! Do you want me to kill you? You deserve it you know? I'll even use your own wand to do it. Would you like that?"

"Hey you!" I hear a familiar voice yell. It distracts him and I make my move.

He gets his answer, just not the one he expects. Pulling the spike out of my leg, I wandlessly banish it. Gloating is for idiots. Sometimes it'll earn you a tent spike through the neck. Gurgling blood, with the sign of his master in the sky overhead, he collapses. Through the fog of

pain still surrounding me, I surge forward and rip my wand from his grasp. He's too far gone for what little I could do for him already. Even if he isn't, I'm not inclined to provide comfort and assistance to a man who was using an Unforgivable on me a few seconds ago. Instead, I look towards my own safety first. There could be others and I'm not in good shape. Turning, I search for the source of the voice and see the Sorting Hat on the ground.

"You're rusty HJ. That one almost had you." I mutter a quick spell that closes the wound in my calf. Cuts and bruises I can do something about. Cracked ribs are beyond me. That's a long and painful looking walk to the tree line. I scan for further signs of movement and see none.

"Almost doesn't count, Hat. Thanks for buying me the second I needed." I summon it back to me and put it on my head. While we wait, I decide to 'dumb down' my spell casting and look more like a fourth year who got lucky. First I levitate a few items and banish them. Thankfully, the Death Eater used his own wand to cast the torture curse. I don't have to clear that one.

The transfigured claw is still tightly wrapped around the other one. I dispel it and bind him in standard ropes, stunning him once more for good measure and taking his wand. A jet of water douses the burning wagon and I slide in behind it. Next bad guy that comes along gets ambushed. Running for it quite frankly doesn't appeal to me right now. Flying is an option, but one of the brooms they were filching is snapped and I detect a possession charm on the second one. Switching my wand to my left hand, I feel my rib cage and press against the pain. Nothing seems to be floating free, which means cracked or just bruised. Painful, but not life threatening.

It's a good guess that the Death Eaters won't linger. They're hit and run artists. If I stagger off, there's a chance that the stunned one wakes up and escapes. So, I'll wait about ten minutes and set off wand sparks to attract attention.

From my hiding spot I stare at the giant serpent in the skull hovering above me. This is a bad way to start off a new school year. I've never been a fan of divination, but even I can spot a bad omen.

Amelia Bones looks like the picture of efficiency on the raised stage in the center of the room. I shift uncomfortably in my chair. Three cracked ribs and a quaffle-sized bruise on my chest are to blame - pain potions notwithstanding! “This is an official Ministry of Law Enforcement inquest into the events of last night – including the physical assault on Mr. Harry Potter, the subsequent death of Reginald Yaxley and the capture of Vincent Crabbe, Senior. Mr. Potter, allow me to stress that you are not facing any charges at this time and we appreciate your participation despite your injuries. We’ll do our level best to get you out of here and on your way to school.”

I should be getting off the train in Hogsmeade right now. Instead, I’m sitting in a Ministry courtroom after spending a rather trying night in St. Mungo’s getting my chest examined. It’s no surprise that I’m cranky and irritable on less than one hour of sleep. Arthur Weasley sitting next to me places a comforting hand on my right shoulder as I look over at Dumbledore acting in his ‘official capacity’. He gives me a reassuring smile complete with the twinkling eyes.

“What have you learned thus far, Amelia?” Fudge asks nervously. Looks like I wasn’t the only one who didn’t have the best of nights. All eyes are on Wizarding Britain right now and things aren’t looking good for Fudge. On one hand, the man dragged Hagrid off to Azkaban just to be seen ‘doing something’. On the other hand, he pretty much laughed off what happened to Aunt Marge last year. Bagnold was the one who sent Sirius away without a trial, so I’ll reserve judgment on Cornelius Fudge right now.

“According to sworn statements there were at least a dozen persons wearing Death Eater garb. The clothing and masks worn by Mr. Crabbe and Mr. Yaxley were authentic and not simply transfigured for the occasion. The appearance and subsequent spell discharge badly damaged the camp site. An examination of their wands indicates numerous destructive spells. It is important to note that the final spell cast by Mr. Yaxley’s wand was the Cruciatus Curse.”

There's a collective gasp from the small audience and several of them now openly stare at me. Arthur gives me a look of both shock and pity. All I could do is nod at him. Beyond my chest injuries, my entire body is still aching. A powerful enough caster can make the effects of the curse last for weeks, so I'll definitely be in pain for the foreseeable future.

Clearing her throat, Madame Bones continues, "We have taken the statement from the Sorting Hat of Hogwarts indicating that it accompanied Mr. Potter to the World Cup with the permission of Headmaster Albus Dumbledore."

"Is it still here?"

Dumbledore leans forward. "No, I sent it along to Hogwarts for the Sorting Ceremony. Both Madame Bones and I questioned it extensively while Mr. Potter was being tended."

One upside to having the memories of James Potter running around my head is I do know how to get my story straight. Provided the Hat didn't deviate from our story, I'll look like a kid who fought well, but not wandlessly.

"Mr. Potter, will you please tell us in your own words about your experiences from yesterday."

Taking a sip from the water in front of me, I begin, "Well, things were happening pretty quickly. The Hat and I saw a whole group of them together. Most everyone else had already run off, so we tried to lay low and not be spotted. If we had started to run, we'd have stood out like a sore thumb. They started breaking up and a few of them were still terrorizing the Muggles. So, I kept my wand out and tried to hide as best I could. Two of them came around summoning brooms, trunks and other things from the wreckage. When they cleared some of the debris out from in front of me, I figured I couldn't hide anymore. I banished a cart at them."

"So, you attacked them first." I'd recognize Lucius Malfoy's voice anywhere.

“They were the ones wearing Death Eater costumes and looting, Mr. Malfoy.”

“Mr. Malfoy, if you would be so kind to allow Mr. Potter to continue. I would remind you that you are a guest at these proceedings. I can and will have you removed.” It’s nice to know that someone hasn’t been bought off by his gold. Hopefully Edgar, his family, and Amelia’s deceased fiancé Benjy Fenwick are smiling somewhere right now.

“My sincerest apologies, Madame Bones. Please, child, do continue.” I have to hand it to Lucius. First, he implicates me and, upon being rebuffed, he tries to marginalize me. If I didn’t know he was trying to get me angry, it’d probably work.

“The one that dodged the cart – I guess that was Mr. Crabbe – threw some kind of spell at me. All I saw was a flash in the dark and something went flying past me. I sent a bludgeoner at him.”

“For clarification of the inquest and Mr. Potter’s personal benefit, the spell used and identified from Mr. Crabbe’s wand was ‘Telum Glacis’ – or the ice spear.” A quiet murmur spreads through the crowd. The ‘I was just out having some fun’ defense doesn’t hold up when a bloke starts trying to impale people with a chunk of ice.

“My bludgeoner must have clipped him and sent him stumbling; I eventually caught him with a stunner and bound him in some ropes.”

“Pardon my interruption again, but I as I recall, the basic stunner is taught until Mr. Potter’s fourth year, which is starting as we speak. Similarly, the Incarcerus rope-binding charm is fifth year material.”

I can see Madame Bones bristling and trying to compose a reply. Malfoy’s baiting her now and trying to disrupt the proceedings. I intervene. “Do you have a point? What year do they teach people to hurl ice spears or use Unforgivables? For that matter, where were you after the World Cup last night?”

Despite my attempt to draw him out, Lucius just smiles and answers coolly, “I was on my way to the post-victory festivities with my son. I was in the company of my wife and several guests. No, I was merely

saluting you on demonstrating the initiative to learn spells beyond your year.”

“Was it a masked ball? There are people who weren’t happy that I somehow managed to send their master away. I make it a point to know how to defend myself.”

Dumbledore sweeps in, “Indeed, commendable and worthy of acknowledgement, Harry. Now if we can continue. I believe we were talking about Mr. Crabbe using a potentially lethal spell and Mr. Potter subduing him. Please continue, Harry.”

Taking a calming breath and another sip of water, I say, “Anyway, it took me a couple of stunners to hit the Death Eater. During that time someone set off the Dark Mark.”

“You didn’t witness either of the two you encountered triggering the Dark Mark?” Fudge asks.

Amelia turns to her superior and gestures to a map displayed on the wall, “Minster, the Mark was sent from the edge of the forest. Mr. Potter and the two suspects were in this area here. In addition to those reporting financial losses to the Ministry this morning, Mr. Ollivander has reported numerous people at his store this morning purchasing replacement wands. We’ve asked that he retain a list of any new wands he sells in the next two weeks.”

Arthur whispers in my ear, “Charlie lost his somewhere along the way.”

I nod, storing away the fact that Charlie isn’t necessarily good in a fight. “The other Death Eater got out from under the cart and caught me with a bludgeoner. It hurt quite a bit and tossed me quite a ways. He fired a disarming charm, but it missed.”

“Our reports indicate that Mr. Yaxley used a disarming charm and a summoning charm at this point. In the darkness, Mr. Yaxley must have incorrectly assumed that he had disarmed Mr. Potter. I know this must be difficult for you, young man but please continue. . .”

“After that he used the Unforgivable on me. He let it off for a second and that’s when I banished a bunch of stuff laying around on the ground at him.”

“According to attending Mediwitch at St. Mungo’s, Mr. Potter suffered three cracked ribs, two bruised ribs and numerous contusions and lacerations. He also demonstrated symptoms consistent with exposure to Cruciatus curse, including ruptured blood vessels. Mr. Yaxley was slain by an object embedded in his neck. Blood was found on the inside of the mask and allows us to conclude that he was wearing the mask at the time of his death. Records show that he was among those that had claimed to have been bewitched by He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named and was never charged.”

“Amelia, what of your efforts to find Sirius Black? Is it possible that he could be the mastermind of this utter embarrassment to our country?”

I grumble under my breath, but Fudge is drawing a natural conclusion as the Minister of Law Enforcement answers, “We currently believe that he is out of the country, Minister. Our search is currently focused on working with the Ministries in the rest of Europe and North America. With last night’s events, I am planning to reduce the Aurors outside England and intensifying our search inside the country. With the Tournament taking place and the number of complaints from parents of the students, I do not recommend using the Dementors at Hogwarts.”

The crowd seems to be of a general consensus that Dementors around children are a bad thing. I’m not inclined to argue that point, since there is going to be a small horde of foreigners at the school, it would be doubly so.

“Minister, if I may, perhaps bringing in known former associates of Sirius Black, such as the Werewolf Lupin for questioning might prove fruitful in the search.” Shit! Lucius is spinning this towards Sirius and Fudge is buying into it.

Quickly, I fire back, “Minister, if I may, perhaps bringing in known associates of Mr. Crabbe and Mr. Yaxley would be more fruitful. Tell

me, Mr. Malfoy, were they on the list of the people expected at your post-victory party?"

Sternly, but with a hint of a smile Amelia Bones regards me, "Mr. Potter, it is not your place, nor is it Mr. Malfoy's, to speculate on what course of action my Department will be taking, but I do thank both of you for your suggestions. Now let us discuss Mr. Crabbe. He claims to have no memories of last evening."

"Was he Obliviated?" Being reduced to a spectator, I slide a second pain potion out of my borrowed plain robes and down some. I wonder how much it cost Malfoy to get in long enough to alter Crabbe's memories.

"Possibly, he shows signs consistent with it, but we had Aurors stationed at his room."

"Who was the first to examine him?"

A voice very familiar to my memories answers, "That would be me." I look at the grizzled frame of Alastor Moody standing from the gallery.

"The Ministry thanks you for your service Alastor, but reminds you that you are retired from active duty. Proper protocol would have been to allow those on active service to examine him first."

"Sorry to run roughshod over your boys, Amy, a horde of goblins couldn't have stopped me from looking into rumors of Dark Wizards running loose. Retired from the force I may be, but I'm always keeping an eye on things and people." There isn't much doubt where that crazy eye of his was focused – directly on Lucius Malfoy.

Dumbledore's turn, "Indeed, Alastor has been kind enough to accept a teaching position this year. I take the welfare of my students very seriously and would greatly prefer that the Dementors remain at Azkaban." I cock an eyebrow. Moody teaching children! That must have been some conversation between the two of them! I would have loved to have been in on that one. Moody had taught James quite a bit. The old Auror wasn't the most powerful wand around, but he made up for it in guile. I guess that answers the 'who's teaching

DADA?’ question this year and here I am thinking that it’s going to be a boring year!

For the most part, the rest of the inquest fails to hold my attention. Perhaps it’s the pain or the lack of sleep – most likely both. Crabbe Senior will be charged with one count of inciting a riot, one count of looting, one count of conspiracy to commit mayhem, and one count of aggravated assault. Arthur speaks up to inquire why not attempted murder, but Madame Bones answers that since I had attacked first, they couldn’t be assured of making the attempted murder charge stick. The assault charge can’t really be disputed. My classmate is looking at not seeing his Daddy for the next five to fifteen years depending on what the Wizengamot decides. It’s not much, but it’s something.

Finally, realizing that I’m still here and in pain, they blissfully release Mr. Weasley to escort me to Hogwarts. We Floo back to the Burrow, where I get a brief bit of entertainment watching Arthur fend off his wife as she tries to examine me. I’m going to spend the first night or two in the Infirmary. Ollie stopped by in the wee hours of my pain-filled morning and I had him send Dobby and my stuff on to Hogwarts.

A check of the time and I see I’ve missed my opportunity to hear the Sorting Hat’s song. I’ll have to get it to tell me what it ended up doing.

A Thestral carriage and two Aurors are waiting for us at the Three Broomsticks, compliments of Madame Bones. I recognize Kingsley Shacklebolt, but not the attractive pink-haired trainee with him. I’m in too much pain to even be interested in flirting with her even after I find out she’s Andy Tonks’ not-so-little girl. I vaguely recall that she was a seventh year ‘Claw, when I first started here – for the second time. That means she must be finishing up her Auror training and be assigned to a field agent now. Kingsley looks thrilled at his ‘chatterbox’ of a partner as she grills me about my encounter with a “No Shit Death Eater”. She’s rather exuberant.

They follow us inside and I am brought to the Infirmary. Arthur leans in close, “The boy in your year, Peter Yaxley is Reginald Yaxley’s nephew. His twin daughters are named Theresa and Amanda. They are second year Slytherins. From what I gather, you’ve never been

well liked in that house and this certainly is not going to help. Like most other purebloods, there are plenty of distant cousins all around. You were even probably related to him in some manner. No matter what anyone tells you, Harry, you did what you needed to do. They'll try to call you a murderer, but don't listen to them! Understand me? Any man that uses that curse on a child deserves killing. I'm proud of the way you handled yourself back in the inquest and on the battlefield. Be extra careful this year. I, for one, don't like how things are starting out. If you ever need to talk to someone, I'm just an owl away."

I graciously accept a loose hug from the man, who carefully avoids my injured areas, and remind myself that he thinks he's dealing with a fourteen-year-old who has just been tortured and has just killed a man. Arthur was never really much good in a fight. He might not stack up very well when wands come out, but there's more to living than just fighting, and there are other lessons I can learn from him.

Using a Dreamless Sleep potion can often be compared to being whacked in the head with a mallet. Coming out of it, I feel like my head is full of cobwebs and weighs about three times what it is supposed to. I'm rested, but right on cue, the aches and pains start up again. A look at the clock on the wall tells me I'm missing a class, not that I really care or even know where I should be. For the moment, I'm alone, but I can see that the beds around me have been sat on and there are two additional chairs placed in the aisle at the foot of my bed. Looks like I had plenty of visitors.

"Ah Mr. Potter, again I find you under my care. Flying cars, exposure to Dementors, and now the Cruciatus Curse – I'm beginning to wonder what exactly you do during the summer. How are you feeling after a night's rest?"

I smile at the nurse; she's somewhat sweet on me. "Dazed, confused and sore – everywhere."

“I have a regimen of potions that you’ll need to adhere to for the next seven days. They’ll lessen the effects of your injuries. The redness in your eyes will fade as the blood vessels heal.”

“Where did the potions come from?” I ask, wondering if I look in a mirror, would I look like Voldemort?

“They were shipped over from St. Mungo’s. Why do you ask?”

“May I be candid with you?”

“Certainly,” she answers.

“I killed a former Death Eater at the World Cup. I’d rather not be drinking something brewed by another former Death Eater, if I can help it.” I have a few other reasons to dislike Snape, but this is the most plausible and the one that she’ll have to take seriously. Might as well start chipping away at him here. It’s not like I’m doing anything else right now. My original plan had been to ‘entertain’ myself by harassing Snape at every turn. That plan needs to be revised now that Death Eaters are openly wearing their garb again. I’m not going to sit in a class full of their children, who probably played dress up at some point with their parents’ cloaks and masks. No, a room full of pissed-off Slytherins and containers of dangerous chemicals aren’t a healthy combination for me.

She looks horrified and starts to rise to Snape’s defense, but I cut her off. “There were about a dozen of them. Who knows who was under those cloaks? All I ask is that if I require a potion for routine treatment that you either brew it or have it brought from St. Mungo’s.”

The witch in front of me looks very thoughtful. “Provided it isn’t an emergency situation and it doesn’t interfere with treatment of any other patients, I’ll grant that request. You’ve been in here far too often for my liking and you’re not even at the halfway point yet.” Taking on a lighter tone she smiles, “Now, I have to have a few elves in here to straighten up before all your guests arrive.”

I'm swamped with visitors during lunchtime. The Katie versus Ginny 'war' continues to simmer, as each tries to get close to me. Fortunately, Ron and Hermione came straight here after Transfiguration let out and I strategically place them in the spots next to me. The rest of the fourth years were right behind them. Everyone wants to ask me about the fight, the poor deluded fools see glory and heroism. What I saw is blood spurting out of a man's neck, while I made sure my I didn't have a punctured lung.

One noticeable absence is Neville. In the past, he usually popped in during my stays in the Infirmary, but I'm sure this hits far too close to home for him. I can't blame him one bit. When I ask about the Hat's song at the sorting feast, the only comments I get are that it was somewhat long and kind of boring. That doesn't sound like anything the Hat was planning, though it did once say that on more than one occasion, it simply recycles a song it used three or four hundred years ago. I'll have to ask it, the first chance I get.

Hermione seems upset about the fact that Hogwarts uses House Elves. I almost want to ask her if she thought Filch cleaned the place by himself, but I hold my tongue. She's so brilliant that even I sometimes forget that she is woefully naïve about the magical world. Come to think of it, I was too!

All Ron can talk about is the Tournament and everyone seems to agree that the age limit is grossly unfair. Maybe it's the aches and pain, the fact that I nearly died – again – the other night, or the notion that these kids couldn't possibly be ready for the kind of challenges involved, but I actually want to side with the adults on this one. A Potter had finished runner-up in it once, six hundred years ago. Around four hundred and fifty years ago, another Potter died during the infamous 'Tournament That No One Won'.

Both Ron and Hermione are a bit put off by the large number of Gryffindors surrounding us. I'm pretty certain that they were expecting 'alone' time and not the entire common room tagging along.

"Harry, it's not just an individual competition, there's also going to be an All-School team and Professor McGonagall says I might have the opportunity to compete on it! There will be debates and

demonstrations! It all sounds rather exciting.” Sounds like they must have revived the team competitions; usually those are the rules when it’s hosted at Beauxbatons. I wonder if the folks from Durmstrang insisted on concessions as well. Their rules usually require more tasks than the three that the ‘Hogwarts Rules’ typically use. I opt not to discuss the fact that I have studied up on the Tournament.

Part of me wouldn’t mind competing, probably the left over glory hound, but I’m not going anywhere near the Goblet of Fire. There are at least three ways I could get around an age line. The easiest is Occlumency. If the line can’t sense a person, it can’t eject them. A powerful enough Confundus charm would override the settings on the age line, but that would be fairly obvious. Finally, I could shift into my Animagus form, again obvious, but effective nonetheless. That’s just off the top of my head! After James lost his parents, he briefly lived with a distant relation, who used an age line around the liquor cabinet. It stopped James for roughly two days. He was drunk for the rest of those three weeks, but this year I’m turning over a new leaf – a leaf that involves doing my utmost to avoid life and death situations.

After fending off the question for the third time the door opens and Malfoy enters. It must have been boring on the train this year. Naturally, Crabbe and Goyle are flanking him. Behind them are the rest of the Slytherin fourth years including a red-faced Peter Yaxley.

“So this is what a murderer looks like. Frankly, I’m surprised they let you come back to school, Potter. Hopefully, Father can lobby to have you removed.” I split my attention between Malfoy and Yaxley. Crabbe won’t do a damn thing, but Yaxley just might. I ease my wand out of the holster and keep it concealed under the covers.

Everyone seems to be waiting for me to respond, “You see your father all the time, Draco. That’s the face of a real murderer, and an ass-kisser to boot. That little mark he claims was forced on him – you have to kill to get that mark. If he hadn’t been sacked from the Board of Governor’s, I’m sure he’d be doing more than just lobbying for my removal. I guess money can’t buy everything – can it?”

“My father is a great man!” Honestly, this is too easy. Harry Potter might have had problems with this little ponce, but HJ doesn’t need to

break a sweat. How did I ever miss the giant buttons following him around just waiting to be pushed?

“By his own admission he was bewitched by Voldemort.” I enjoy all the flinches from everyone but the Muggleborns. “So, he was either too weak to break free or he’s a lying killer, who used his money to buy his way out of prison. Which is it, Draco?”

I can see his mind working the problem. He can’t get around it, and so he ignores it. “It doesn’t make you any less of a killer.”

“I can’t argue with you there, Draco. I had to kill in self-defense – the only regret is that it wasn’t your father under that mask, but I didn’t really have a choice. Before you get any cute little ideas about playing dress up like you did with the Dementors last year, only this time slipping on little Death Eater masks, you’ll see how I respond.”

“Threatening my students, Potter? Perhaps there is some credence to their argument that you are a violent menace.” I had been wondering when Snape would arrive. A nice room filled with lots of witnesses, I couldn’t ask for any better.

“Where were you the other night, Death Eater?” I hear several sharp intakes of breath at my accusation.

“That will be a week of detention for your disrespect, Potter. I’d take points, but your house doesn’t have any yet.”

“You wanted to see a murderer, Malfoy, there’s one right there. How about a quick history lesson, Professor Death Eater? How many people did you kill to ‘earn’ your Dark Mark? Did you play with the females before or even after?” Sirius once said that the only way a girl would get into bed with Snape was if she was dead. It was the start of a wonderful series of ‘Necro-Snapey’ jokes that ran throughout the Marauders’ fifth year. If I resurrected the magical cartoons on the bathroom walls, would it be too obvious?

The temperature in the room must have dropped twenty degrees. I enjoy seeing his face twist angrily and I avert my eyes the moment I felt him start to bore into me. “Potter, when I am through with you . . .”

“Professor Snape!” exclaimed a rather irate looking Poppy Pomfrey standing at the entrance of her office. “You will take your students and leave my infirmary at once!” My face remains an emotionless mask, but inside I’m smiling. Snivellus always had a blind spot for anything Potter and I’d set him up beautifully. Having already primed the Nurse to where she was suspicious of the man, I just gave her more proof. Since he’s been trying to get me kicked out of this school for years now, I think I should start returning the favor.

“You heard her, Death Eater Scum! Get the hell out of here!” I shout as he turns to leave, trying to put some fear into the anger in my voice. I don’t have to go far to get it either. By dinnertime, it’ll be all over the castle. Even if I end up with the detentions, it’ll be worth it. I don’t even need the Marauder’s Map to know he’s headed for Dumbledore’s office. I’m sure the old man will be about shortly to tell the story of the great personal risk involved in Snape turning spy.

Perhaps I pushed it a bit too far. The Nurse rounds on me as she kicks all the Gryffs out of the infirmary. “If you can’t behave, you’ll not be having any visitors! Out with the lot of you!”

Once the room is clear, she storms back into her office for a few minutes, but then finally returns. “Mr. Potter, you cannot address a member of the staff in such a manner!”

Now let’s see if I can deliver another damaging blow. “He hates me, Madame. I don’t trust him and there’s little you can do to convince me otherwise. Right now I’ll bet you he’s headed to the Headmaster’s office and I’m guessing within the hour Professor Dumbledore will be down here. But let me ask you this, if you look over your records how many more students from the other houses end up here because of a Potion’s accident. I bet if you look back, you’ll see a statistical anomaly.” Lily always loved the phrase ‘statistical anomaly’. It’s the kind of phrase a person uses when they want to be intellectually superior to someone without sounding that way.

She forcefully tells me to get some rest and heads back into her office. I honestly don’t know what she’ll find if she looks, but the seed has been planted. I’m not sure who to work on next. McGonagall seems a

given, but Sprout spends a good chunk of her summer growing his ingredients and there's no love lost between Snape and Flitwick. Sarah Underhill was a Ravenclaw. I'll have to figure out how to work that in at some point. I can blame it on Remus and a loose angry tongue. If I have to be stuck in this school for the next few years, I'm going to do my best to run Snivellus out of here, as fast and painfully as possible.

It takes only thirty minutes for the doors to open and the figure of Albus Dumbledore to slip into the room. Nurse Pomfrey must think I have the gift of sight right about now.

"Hello, Harry. How are you feeling?" He's starting off with the Grandfatherly approach.

"It still hurts, but the Potions are helping."

"I understand there was a rather heated discussion here earlier."

"You mean when Professor Snape brought all the Slytherins in my year by to call me a murderer? From what I understand they were in Transfiguration with the Gryffindors. It seems to be a rather odd occurrence, sir. The Dungeons are nowhere near here."

"Indeed they are not, Harry. I have already addressed this matter with Severus. He had his reasons for coming, but I do believe he also had deeper motivations and I do not condone such actions; however, I must ask that you refrain from addressing him as a Death Eater. With yesterday's events, such an accusation could be inflammatory."

"You mean like when people were getting petrified and everyone accused me of being the Heir of Slytherin because I am a Parselmouth? No, actually, I didn't have a choice in being a Parselmouth. He did have a choice when he took the Dark Mark."

"Yes, Professor Snape made a series of poor choices in his youth, for which he pays the price to this very day. However, Harry, he is your teacher. You are a student here. A certain behavior is expected."

"I'm sorry sir; I've seen the accounts and read your own words. 'At great personal risk Severus Snape turned and became a spy for the light side.' You would have me ignore what he did before he became your spy, but you ignore what he has done since the war ended. How many times has he been in your office complaining about me?"

"He did save your life. Surely, that must count for something. He has proven that he values your safety." He chooses not to answer the question. Of course, he knows I have spent the summer with the Hat.

I snap back, "Because he owed my family a debt. Can you say that he would have done so otherwise? Did he come to you immediately telling you Quirrell was trying to kill me? That's why he keeps trying to get me out of here, so he can weasel out of repayment. If I'm not here, he wouldn't be forced to defend me and Quirrell could have killed me elsewhere. I'd rather not count on the whims of magic forcing him to help me. I watched him gloating about wanting to see Sirius kissed by the Dementors. Re- uh Lupin was driven out of here simply out of spite." Mentally, I kick myself for almost calling him Remus.

"No man is a saint, Harry. We all struggle with our demons, some are better at hiding that struggle. You see only his dark motivations, but I also see a man that charged out into danger when he realized that Professor Lupin had not taken his medication, because he knew students were in danger. When Tom inhabited poor Professor Quirrell's body, Severus covertly investigated the danger. He knows full well that Tom is trying to regain corporeal form. He could have just as easily assisted his former master in recovering the stone. The information he provided when he turned during the war saved several lives. Time and again, he has proven his worth to me. When taking the true measure of a man, you must look at both the good and the bad and decide which is more important."

Clearly, I'm not getting anywhere with Dumbledore. His delusional faith runs too deep. I could undercut his arguments by pointing out that, most likely, Snape only turned because the debt forced him to try and save James Potter's life, but that would lead to me revealing the Prophecy. Even then, he failed. I'll switch tactics. "Sir, I'd like to arrange for alternative instruction in Potions. He loathes me and I feel the same way about him. Even you have to admit that having the two

of us in the same room takes away from his ability to teach and the students' ability to learn. Since he can't go, it has to be me. I'd like to hire a private tutor."

"There are precedents for such a practice, but that could be very expensive. Typically, this is done when the student demonstrates a gifted nature beyond the course work and is done with the Board of Governors approving the Headmaster's recommendation. Part of growing up, Harry, is learning to deal with people that you'd rather not. Perhaps a 'trial' period is in order, if by the Winter Holidays conditions have not improved; I would be more likely to support bringing in an outside tutor."

He's going for the glass half-full argument. I'll counter with the glass half-empty. "What if I am allowed outside tutoring now? Before the Winter Holidays, my skill can be evaluated and that can dictate whether it be allowed to continue? My trust vault is adequate and since this is pertaining to my education, I could petition the Goblins for limited access to my family vaults." He doesn't flinch at my mention of the Potter Vaults. I had wondered if he had been hiding them from me, but his non-reaction only serves to reinforce that he is indeed hopelessly out of touch. The roughly one hundred and forty year gulf separating us is a virtual chasm.

"It is not the optimal solution, but nevertheless, it is plausible. I would like you to take your time and make a calm decision on this. Haste and anger often lead us down a less than desirable path. I will return tomorrow and we can discuss this option further. I can see from the dour looks Madame Pomfrey is giving me that I have overstayed my welcome. Pleasant dreams lad. Hopefully, the new day will bring better choices than the previous one."

By Sunday, I'm finally cleared to go back to the common room. I haven't seen the last of Poppy Pomfrey, not by a long shot. A solution was reached, and I'm actually rather pleased about it. Professor Dumbledore tried several approaches. One had me taking Potions with the Claws and the Puffs. It looked marginally promising until we realized that the majority of my classes would also have to be

switched. I might as well move into one of their dorms. He obstinately refused to allow an outside instructor in. My first recommendation had been to contact Snape's predecessor – I figured Horace Slughorn would jump, or is it waddle, for joy at the opportunity to try and sink his claws for the second time into me. Reluctantly, I also offered Remus Lupin's name.

Of course, that didn't fly for the same reason he was run out of here. Funny how you can survive a vicious assault and be afflicted with a 'condition' and can't teach here, but you can be an actual killer that suddenly acquires a moral compass and all is forgiven.

I was this close to telling the old man that I would seek an immediate transfer to New Salem, when the solution came in the form of our resident Mediwitch.

"Bloody Hell, Harry, I can't believe you got out of classes with Snape! You're a bloody genius!"

Hermione snorts at Ron's proclamation with three sets of knitting needles working in the air around her, but he's not too far off. "Ron, the git has it out for me and it's affecting how he treats everyone in the class. That's not helping anyone learn. One of us has to go, I'm just lucky that Madame Pomfrey convinced Dumbledore that with all the visitors to the castle this year, she's going to need additional help in the Ward. I already know most of the basic first aid spells and we're going to focus on the medicinal draughts at first to help stockpile. I've replaced six hours of class time with twelve hours of working and learning in the Ward. It's not exactly going to be a picnic and it's going to cost me extra time as well. Not to mention that there will be a steady stream of Slytherins showing up whenever she's trying to teach me something."

James wasn't a slouch at Potions, but he wasn't great either. Like most everything I remember, I'll need lots of practice to get back into the swing of things. That reminds me, I'll need to find an unused classroom now that I can really cast spells again – time to really see how powerful I am.

Hermione nods approvingly, though I suspect there's a spark of jealousy hidden behind her eyes. "I have to agree with Harry here. Potions isn't the place for people who loathe each other. It can be rather dangerous in there."

"Thanks Hermione. What is with all the knitting anyway?"

I shouldn't have asked as I am 'treated' to the idea of S.P.E.W. Currently, still having an elf in my employ, I listen to her positions and she makes several valid points. I consider mentioning this to her, but when she gets to the part about leaving all the Hats and such lying around, I have to stop her.

"Hermione, do you really think that will work?" The look on her face seems to indicate that she does. "You don't get it do you? Only the owner can free an elf. You don't own the elves of Hogwarts. They do your laundry, so they handle your clothes all the time. An owner can give the elf clothes as a chore to clean them. It's only when they give them clothes, in anger outside of a 'chore' that it frees them. Technically, Professor Dumbledore 'owns' all the elves and I can't really see him mistreating them or allowing them to be mistreated. Why don't you go to Professor McGonagall and ask to speak to the Headmaster himself about it? I think your heart is in the right place."

Ever since she assembled an airtight case to defend Buckbeak last year only to have it completely ignored by the Ministry, all too willing to placate Lucius, she's had a mad on for creature rights. Though in retrospect, Hagrid might not have been the best choice to deliver a legal position. Still, it's commendable what she's doing.

"And you suddenly have all the answers!" Uh-oh, someone doesn't like having their parade rained on.

"No I don't. But you've have you spoken to any elves about this yet? Have you spoken to anyone who owns an elf? I'm sure you've read up on whatever you can find in the library, but those are words written by people. It's like what Binns teaches us about the Goblin Wars. We always hear the Human side of it, but never the other side. I've been wondering what the Goblins tell their children. Look, I'm not trying to pick a fight or even tell you that you shouldn't do this. All I'm saying is

if you want to do this thing, you shouldn't rush into it. Approach this like a debate and even play devil's advocate and look for the argument of why House Elves should be enslaved. That way when you run into someone who doesn't agree with you, you've already prepared for what they'll say."

She looks like I just hit her with a powerful Confundus charm. Maybe it was her rash emotional side that Hat saw that made it put her in Gryffindor rather than Ravenclaw. I had been worried that just learning Occlumency wouldn't be enough to keep her occupied, but now I'll be doing extra work in the Infirmary and she'll be doing this whole House Elf thing. That should really keep her busy. She leaves, still in a bit of a huff, but when she calms down it should make sense to her.

Of course, this leaves Ron out in the cold. He needs a project of his own. Maybe a girlfriend? No, maybe not right now. Despite there not being any House-to-House Quidditch competition, there's supposed to be an All-Star team. My record as Seeker almost assures me of a starting spot, but we'll see. Will Lucius break down and buy his little boy a Firebolt? Our chasers could use someone to keep their skills sharp. Ron wants to be a Keeper, so why not?

"Oi, Ron, why don't you ask Angelina about practicing for Keeper for next season? I'm guessing all three girls are going to try for the all-House squad, and they'll need someone to practice against. She'll remember it for next season ... I'll even talk to her if you want."

The offer is much too good to refuse. I should have made him work for it a little. A few minutes later, Ron's over discussing practice times with the girls. The only downside is I'm all alone now and that means . . .

"Hi Harry."

"Hello, Katie. Aren't you going to try for the all-House team?"

"Sure, I just gave my schedule to Angie and she'll work out the details."

We discuss how I'm feeling. She avoids hot button topics like Snape and Death Eaters. My guess is she already knows when the first Hogsmeade weekend is. If Katie's the 'early bird', I guess that makes me the worm?

I return to my room after accepting Katie's invitation to go to Hogsmeade and catch Neville polishing his wand. No, not that; he's actually polishing his wand.

"Neville, how's it going?" I pull out a cloth and give mine the once over.

"Gran insists I polish my wand every day. It's kind of a habit - cherry with Hippogriff feather. What's yours?"

I answer and realize that it's Frank's wand and what little I know about wands is that was a particular combination. "That's a pretty wild combination. How long did it take for Ollivander to find that one?"

"It's actually my father's wand." He says quietly.

"Really, I always read that passed down wands don't always work so well. Look at Ron. Through second year, he was using his brother Charlie's old wand. As soon as he got fitted for one, he got along much better. Maybe that's been a part of your problem with your casting?"

He looks dejected. "Yeah, that's what I thought too. I asked her about it and she told me that if this one was good enough for my father, it should be good enough for me."

I apply my Marauder skills to the problem. "She won't let you get a wand of your own, huh? Mine was pretty expensive, but even still, it was only seven galleons. How much money do you have?"

"None. She has a tab for me at the shops in Hogsmeade. She basically sees everything I buy." Wow! No control issues there on Augusta's part. If Frank ever does come out of his coma-like state, he

is seriously going to go after his Mum. I'll make sure of it – even help if he'll let me!

“If your wand gets damaged, say by a clumsy Harry Potter, he would be honor bound to replace it.”

Neville looks like I just punched him. I guess that wasn't the right answer. “You're not touching Dad's wand! I won't let you!”

“Whoa, easy there Neville, it was just a thought. I didn't know it meant that much to you. How about this, first Hogsmeade weekend, we head to Diagon Alley and I buy you a wand.”

“I'm not some charity case! Besides, we're not allowed to leave Hogsmeade. I heard they put Age Lines around the Floo's.”

“I'll make the arrangements. We'll use my cloak. I can see most of the shops following that rule, but there's bound to be an exception. I know your not a charity case, you're my friend and your grandmother isn't helping you by making you use a wand that's probably not suited for you.”

“Still, we'd be breaking the rules . . .” Alice would probably be looking for someone to pummel, seeing how little spirit he has.

“Think it over, mate. If you don't want to do it now, we can wait until the Holidays and you can consider it a present from me. Look, I am sure your Dad would be honored that you're using his wand, I know mine would, but I also know that he'd want me to be the best Wizard I was capable of being.”

“I guess you're right. Let me think about it.”

“Take your time. Just let me know what you decide.” If we do it early enough in the morning, I can still do the 'token' date with Katie. I hope she isn't deluding herself with visions of going to Madame Puddifoot's.

Neville leaves allowing me to relax on my fourth year bed and collect my thoughts. A ball of fire appears over my head startling the hell out of me. It's Fawkes with the Sorting Hat. Damn thing nearly made me

wet my pants! It drops my laughing friend down on top of me. Did the blasted bird just chuckle?

“Sorry about that, HJ. I just asked the bird to bring me by for a visit.”

“I’m sure you had nothing to do with that.”

“Of course not. Now put me on your head. We’ve only got a few minutes before the damn bird is coming back for me.”

‘What’s wrong, Dumbledore not letting you out?’

‘He was suddenly very interested in what you were doing this summer, as you can well imagine. I’d rather he not know we had this conversation. You might want to send Wood an owl at some point. Dumbledore plans to visit him to discuss you.’

‘How much does he suspect?’

‘Nothing right now, he’s just casting in the dark and Wood is in Norway for two weeks, but I’d get that Owl moving if I were you. You’ve got a little time as Dumbledore is working with the Minister to prevent the Tournament from being moved to one of the other schools. Needless to say the other Ministers weren’t too happy to hear about Death Eaters resurfacing.’

The Hat lets me digest this for a second before continuing, ‘He assumed you spent the remainder of the summer with the Weasleys and was very surprised when you did not. Right now he knows that you were at the Cup with Wood, but not that you pretty much spent the summer with him.’

‘Thanks. I was hoping to not raise any alarms, but I didn’t count on people trying to kill me so early in the year. I’ll get a letter to Ollie out this evening. So what happened with your song? I heard it was just long and boring. I was expecting clever innuendo about things you could do with a flobberworm?’

The Hat tries to sound mortified. 'The cretins do not understand my humor. Do you have a quill handy? Get it out and write the first letter of each line.'

I nod and get it out of my trunk. It sings the song in my mind, and I jot each letter down. When it finishes, I stare down at the parchment. The 'harmless' and meandering song has a hidden message.

'I Want All of You to Bend Over and Take it Up the Arse.'

I chortle in approval as its laughter fills my mind, 'All my songs are transcribed into an appendix in 'Hogwarts: A History'. This isn't the first time I've done it either. One of these days someone will figure it out.'

'That's just enough incentive for me to actually read that book! So, how was Snape when he came into Dumbledore's office?'

'He was almost on the verge of having some color on his pasty white face. Is it just me, or does his complexion remind you of a piece of dog shit left out in the sun for a week? I see you've altered your plan.'

'Oh, I'm still taking him down. I'm just not going to risk my life to do it. All those kids know exactly where their parents were that night. They're probably already thinking of ways to get me. You got any tips on spying on them.'

'Nice touch getting the Nurse on your side – well played, HJ. I'll see what I can come up with. For starters, you could be sassy with that Myrtle girl in the bathrooms. Maybe you could date her instead of the Bell girl? That would really keep the rest of them away! You'd probably have to clear it with the Slytherin Ghost, but you might have a chance there?'

'Why on Earth would I have any pull with the Bloody Baron?'

'You mean Lord Baron William Potter. Oh, I don't know – moron! Why don't you take a fucking guess?'

Author's notes - So here we are, the school year has started. Look for a part-Veela to show up next chapter. I was surprised that there were no inter-school activities during book 4. With Quidditch being such a crazed sport, why wouldn't there be a school vs school tournament? Why wouldn't there be 'knowledge bowl' style contests pitting the best in charms, potions, transfiguration and what not?

Disclaimer - After reading book 7, I don't even want to imagine that I own Harry Potter any more. I don't own it and never will.

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Chapter 7 – I Belong to Nowhere

Thursday September 15th, 1994

I've always been an early riser. Poor sleeping habits mixed with the need to get up and make the Dursleys breakfast have left their mark on me. Another one of those subtle differences between me and James "wake me up at the crack of noon" Potter. Even so, five in the morning is pushing it. It's way too early to be brewing potions, but at least the formula is a simple enough pain reliever.

Madame Pomfrey has an eye for detail. "Potter, your wrist is too limp when stirring. I hope you don't hold your wand like that."

Ignoring the fact that she just called me a "limp wrist", I concentrate on the boiling cauldron in front of me and keep reminding myself that this is much better than Snape.

"Do you know what today is Mr. Potter?"

"Thursday."

"Yes, but today is the day that Madame Hooch takes the first years out for their initial flying lesson. This whole weekend is usually the busiest of the year. Of the thirty-six new students this year, twenty-one are Muggleborn. Even if they make it through the lesson without an injury, they won't listen to her warnings and better than half of them will try some unsupervised flying over the weekend. If we're lucky, all we'll see are bumps, bruises and a few cuts, but there's a reason we keep bone growth serum on hand. This year, with you

around, I'm going to go down there in person and try to nip some of this foolishness in the bud."

"You should take some Balus Oil down with you and make them taste a teaspoon to give them an idea what they're in store for if they fall from their brooms." I laugh knowing how foul that particular plant extract tastes. It is the base material for the Skele-Gro potion and part of what gives it a "unique" flavor.

I glance and catch her smiling at me, "You have a mean streak, Mr. Potter. I like that idea." I wish I could take credit for it, but it was one of the ways James' mum kept him out of the broom shed. "Now don't forget to set your egg timer. Five minutes of simmer followed by one minute of stirring, do that two more times and begin decanting. The cauldron should yield ten doses. I'll be able to verify that they are medicinal grade by lunchtime."

My potion skills impress her. I wonder if word has already reached Snape. The blood replenishers I did earlier this week actually made "medical grade." My blister salve didn't, but in my defense, James was much better with liquids than he was with creams. James always used to annoy Lily by insisting that girls were much better at creams because they used makeup all the time. Lupin and Pettigrew disagreed and found themselves with a James and Sirius special makeover administered while they were asleep. When the glamours were dropped at breakfast, the two of them looked like those mime artists that performed in Muggle parks.

The Nurse came back from the storeroom with a bottle of Balus Oil. Any of the firsties dumb enough to get injured after tasting that filth must really want to learn how to fly!

"Harry, I'm going to the morning staff meeting and then to breakfast. Assuming Professor McGonagall is there, I will let her know that I will be using your services until the practical portion of the flying lesson ends. When Xiomara moves on to basic storage and upkeep, you'll be free to go to your Transfiguration lecture. I'll send one of the elves up with your breakfast."

"Thanks, but I'll make arrangements with the elf that I employ."

“Very good, use my touchstone if anything serious comes up.”

Dobby makes all my food and delivers it. I’ve had better tasting House Elf food, but Dobby has specific orders from me to avoid all other Hogwarts students. The Marauders used to trick the House Elves into spiking the food all the time.

Just because I carry three bezoars in my belt pouch doesn’t mean I’m paranoid...

Thirty minutes later, I was cleaning out my cauldron when my first patients of the morning showed up. As had been predicted, the Slytherins seemed to be coming to the Infirmary much more frequently than normal, especially since everyone knew when the staff meetings were.

Millicent Bulstrode ushers an oddly walking Tracey Davis into the clinic. They are the two “outcasts” of Slytherin, with their genetics working against them. Millicent’s abnormally large and not very easy on the eyes, destined to be the girl picked up at the bar by the bloke whose alcohol consumption had successfully squashed his common sense. I hope she likes the smell of alcohol and sweat! Still, I could be wrong; she might find a handsome prince – albeit one with a unibrow fetish.

Tracey, on the other hand, is quite attractive and already starting to develop some nice curves. A couple of years from now, she’ll be a force to be reckoned with. Her problem isn’t her looks, it’s her Muggleborn mother. In a House that puts blood superiority before everything else, she’s a second-class citizen who’s tolerated because of her father’s wealth and influence.

There’s a cute little Death Eater soap opera behind the origins of Tracey Davis. It’s about a reluctant Death Eater ordered to kill a Muggleborn witch. Instead, he hid her and fell in love with her. After my little encounter with his master, he was able to thumb his nose at all his former cohorts, marry the witch, legally accept their love child and do a two year stint in Azkaban.

“Ladies, what seems to be the problem?”

“Someone pranked Tracey’s soap. Show him your hands.” She’s got some nasty boils on her hand.

“Coated the soap bar with some pus, huh? Easily solved, I’ll get some boil reducer cream. It’ll take away the pain and speed the healing. You’ll want to keep your hands wrapped. The boils will be gone by Sunday.”

Tracey kept shifting uncomfortably. “It’s not just my hands. I was washing somewhere else when I noticed it.”

“Oh.” I say, filing away the little tidbit of where Miss Davis starts washing first. “Well, I can summon Nurse Pomfrey from the staff meeting?”

“Shit! It hurts so much, I don’t care who puts it on! Just fix me!” For such a smallish girl, she has a healthy set of lungs on her.

I head to the cabinet to get the cream and a pair of latex gloves. Shockingly, not all of the Wizarding World is as backwards as it appears. “Fine! Millicent, would you mind applying the cream ‘down there?’ It’ll be less awkward that way.”

“Bugger off, Potter! I’m not putting my hands down there.”

“Alright, so I guess it’s going to be me then.” I stop by the portrait of Headmistress Derwent, who is surveying the unfolding comedy in front of us. “Pardon me, Madame. Could I float your portrait into the examination area? I need to treat a female in her, well, in her private areas and would like a witness.”

“I’ll be your witness,” Bulstrode says – a little too quickly.

“Well, you can come as well, but the Headmistress here was also a top-notch Healer. I need her to make certain that I do this in a professional manner.”

I turn my back to them and use my wand to levitate the painting across the room. I don't need to see the alarmed expressions being exchanged.

"Okay then. Millicent, would you draw the curtains? There's no need to give anyone else coming in a free show. Tracey, you can go ahead and disrobe. It'll be easiest if you lie down on the bed. I can float you if necessary, but the pain should stop when you stop moving."

The Slytherin witch starts dropping her robe when a pop interrupts us and she shrieks letting it fall completely and covering her breasts with her contaminated hands. Now I have to do them too!

"Mr. Harry Potter's breakfast!" Dobby practically screams. "Oh, I did not know, you are busy healing people. Do you want Dobby to go?"

"No, Dobby. This should only take a minute. Just stand quietly over there next to Miss Bulstrode. Tracey! You need to watch where you put your hands. Here go ahead and get some of the cream on your hands and then rub it where you just put them. Sweet Merlin! Sir Nicolas! Don't rise up out of the floor like that! You could have scared me to death!"

"Please accept my apologies, young healer. I've brought the Friar and we wished to speak with you about a private matter concerning an upcoming Deathday."

"Oh, good morning to you too, Friar. I'll get to you two in a second, as soon as I'm finished with Miss Davis here. Just float over there please."

"Get them out of here!" Tracey shrieks.

"Honestly, young miss, we're dead." The Friar responds sounding rather irritated.

"What kind of infirmary are you running here?" Millicent hisses at me. Before I can answer a ball of fire appears directly in the chest of the Fat Friar and trilling Fawkes drops the Sorting Hat on Dobby's head.

“Not the Elf! Damn you, you immortal chicken! One of these days... Eh? What have we here – Potter, two witches, one of them naked, two ghosts, a painting and an elf? Sounds like the start of an interesting joke. What’s the punchline?”

Poor Tracey looks ready to run, clothes or no clothes, and me without a camera. Millicent looks ready to strangle me. “Not now, Hat! Dobby, take the Hat off and get outside the curtain. Sir Nicolas, Honored Friar, would you please wait on the other side of the curtain? I’ll be with you as soon as I can.”

“Anything I can do Potter?” The Hat asks being unusually helpful.

“Shutting up would be nice.” Using the gloves, I apply the cream to her privates and making certain that her breasts are adequately cared for.

“You must be enjoying yourself,” Tracey squeaks at me throwing her robes back on the second I finish.

“You don’t really interest me, Tracey. Anyone who would debase themselves so much to get into Malfoy’s good graces is too insecure for me.” I didn’t respond to her look of shock and occupied myself with wrapping her hands in gauze. “Medical advice time: you’ll need to have someone take notes for you today and help you eat. Every four hours, unwrap your hands and reapply the cream. When you go to the loo, do your lower areas and chest. Any medical questions?”

I wait for a moment staring into her blue eyes and making a point to ignore her barely-covered body. She doesn’t say anything so I continue, “Good. Now, personal advice time: you two have been here for over three years now. If your Housemates don’t like you by now, they probably never will. Doing stupid shit like this because Malfoy wants to spread rumors about me being some kind of perv makes you his tool, not his friend. Let Pansy and Daphne know that the next time one of you tries this, I’ll find something unique about the patterns and send for the Divination Professor. While she does an interpretation of the boils, I’ll get Creevey’s camera so we can have a photographic record!”

Both of them gape at me. Just because they're crafty and ambitious doesn't make them the best liars. "How did you know?"

Waving my wand I throw back the privacy curtains and glance back over my shoulder at them. "Because I'm Harry bloody Potter. Not much goes on in this castle that I don't know about. You'd do well to remember that! Now run along, girls." I watch as they flee from the ward.

Thanking the portrait, I put it back where I first got it and wash the latex smell off my hands so I can finally eat some breakfast.

The hat laughs, "Nice punchline there, Potter. You really showed those ignorant little barely-pubescent twats."

Where does the Hat come up with these lines? I'm not sure I really want to know. "They'll think twice about following one of Malfoy's ridiculous schemes again."

A third ghost floats in to the room and joins the laughing ghosts of Gryffindor and Hufflepuff. There is no laughter from him as the Bloody Baron removes his helm. "I agree, descendant. You have chased two of my snakes back into their holes, yet I know this will not stop them."

"I know you're right, but let me savor the moment, Lord Baron. Thank you for your timely warning."

The Bloody Baron actually being a Potter is rather bizarre even for my "abnormal" life. He agreed to help me, but I need to scratch his back as well. Most every student who has ever been in this school wonders about the blood stains on his tunic. I know the answer.

Lord Baron William Potter was more commonly known in the court of King Henry II as William de Tracy, and the blood staining his tunic belongs to none other than Saint Thomas Becket. The price of killing a holy man at the King of England's request doomed him to the unending limbo of the afterlife.

No Potter had ever been placed in Slytherin since them. He was shocked when I told him I almost was. The Potter family renounced him because the death of the Archbishop of Canterbury hadn't quite gone over with the public all that well. They cursed him to never seek out the family again, but since I sought him out things were different now.

What could I possibly give a ghost? Well, he requires a few things to move on after all this time. The first is to be welcomed back into the family, which is easy enough for me to do as soon as I turn seventeen – again. The land and monies gifted to him for the deed need to be sold. The Dursleys were kind enough to take care of part of that for me and the money will put a nice sized dent in the Potter vaults, but I'll still never need to work a day in my hopefully long life. The last piece of the puzzle is I must ask the current Archbishop of Canterbury to forgive William Potter.

That of course might be a bit tricky, but I'll figure out a way to get it done after I can return him to the family and he's going to help make certain that I live long enough for all this to take place.

His part of the bargain is keeping an eye out for me and letting me know about things like this stupid plot or that Malfoy is trying to convince Peter Yaxley that he should try and really hurt me. The boy has an unhealthy infatuation with me. I'm already starting to think about doing something about it, but I have more important fish to fry – namely Severus Snape.

I'm rather popular with the Puffs and the Claws these days after my comments to He-Who-Does-Not-Bathe were circulated with near record speed around the castle. Chuckling, I decide that I need to spread that name around the school. The ghosts and Dobby leave and I catch up with the Hat while managing to get through my breakfast before the next student arrives. It's Colin with his camera. I must be repaying a debt of karma for invoking the boy's name in front of the girls earlier.

"Good morning Colin. Is there something I can do for you?"

"Is the Nurse in?"

“No, but she’ll be back around ten. Would you like to come back?”

“Yes. No. I don’t know. I’ve got this problem...”

Resisting the urge to comment on what his “problem” might really be, I add. “What kind of problem?”

“I think I’ve been hexed?”

“Really? How?”

His voice is barely above a whisper, “I’ve got hair where I shouldn’t have.”

“Come again?”

“I’ve got hair growing on my thing!” Naturally, he shouts that which gets the Hat laughing. Thank the powers above that no one else is here in the Ward. I sigh and start explaining that there comes a time in a boy wizard’s life when he starts experiencing changes. I graciously refuse his offer to “look at it” and instead hand him a pamphlet called Young Wizard – Big Changes and gently push him out the door telling him to pass it on to his kid brother when he’s done.

No matter what, this is still better than Snape. I’d say that it probably could get worse, but I don’t want to give fate any other reasons to look in my direction today.

Professor McGonagall acknowledges me as I enter the classroom. She’s busy trying to reverse the switching spell on Neville, whose ears are now parts from a cactus. How did he bollocks it up that bad? I watched her lean down and speak into his ears which listen from the aforementioned plant.

This class was with the Ravenclaws so no real worries about someone trying to “get me.” Hermione and Ron are in the front row. I ignore all the glances as I join them.

“What’s the assignment?”

Hermione looks up at me and wags a tulip where her smallest finger is supposed to be, “Switching spells. We’re supposed to switch our pinky for the flower in the pot.” Her finger moves in the flowerpot mimicking her movements. Ron’s finger is still on his hand as he reexamines the text in front of him.

“How did Neville…”

“Don’t ask. You don’t want to know.”

“Okay.” So, fun with switching spells. It gets old real quick. It’s actually a precursor to full Apparition. Not wanting to be bored, I opted to have a bit of fun.

“Hey, Ron! Watch this.” I switched Hermione’s finger in the flowerpot for mine. I now had her smallish finger on my hand. “Now move your finger.” I watch as the finger currently residing on my left hand moves under her control. “Neat, huh? Just be glad you didn’t switch with a nose picker.”

She shrieks as I realize my error. “Put it back right now! Have you even read up on switching human parts? Do you know what you’re doing?” Hey what do you know, everyone’s looking at us now, including James Potter’s favorite instructor.

“Mr. Potter! What have you done?”

“I just switched my finger for Hermione’s.”

The Marauders called her “Mirthless McGonagall” for a reason, her eyes lock with mine. “Do you know the rules and consequences of switching living components?”

To lie or not to lie, that is the question. I shouldn’t know NEWT level material, but “being ahead” is preferable to “being a dunderhead” – odds of getting detentions are much less. “Galbreth’s seven principles – yes, I knew what I was doing. I wouldn’t have done it otherwise.”

She covers her surprise well, though Hermione doesn't. "Very well Mr. Potter, reverse the change."

I know she's watching my wand movements with a critical eye. I opt not to go over the top and switch them all at once. So I switch my finger back for Hermione's and then put the tulip back in the pot and hold my finger out for the Professor's examination and she ensures that both fingers are back on properly.

"Yes, very good work. Normally, I would award points; however, since you missed the lecture regarding safety and opted to start casting spells less than a minute into the room, I will take five points for your disregard of classroom safety and see you in detention Saturday afternoon at three PM, sharp."

Those around us know that she was cutting my Hogsmeade visit short. It makes me angry, and I'm almost tempted to give her some cheek. It would get me out of a date that I don't really want to go on anyway, but I bite my tongue and pull my Transfiguration tome out of my bag and pretend to look at theory that I was well beyond.

One thing that's bugs me since I got these new memories is McGonagall. War really took its toll on her. She was always stern in class, but while she wasn't Slughorn with his 'Slug Club,' she would occasionally have small groups of her older students up for tea in James Potter's time. Of course, most of those students met very bad ends. Since Harry had been here, I didn't recall her doing that at all.

Ron gives me a "tough luck mate" look, but it's Hermione who really isn't helping. "Harry! You don't just go mucking around and casting spells! Doubly so, when you weren't here for the safety portion of the lecture!"

I consider how much trouble I would get in if I did some more NEWT level work and transfigured her into a duplicate of Crookshanks. I put up with her whispered hissy fit for another thirty seconds.

“...honestly, what has gotten into you? Just because you read about Advanced Transfiguration doesn't mean you should try it the first chance you get!”

I give her a sideways glance and whisper back at her. “You've made your point. Now shut up.”

Hermione's used to just going on for as long as she wants. I could have clubbed her and got less of a stunned look on her face. She's quiet for the rest of the class.

I suppose I should feel bad, but I don't. As we leave the class, I follow the Claws and locate my target.

“Michael, Michael Corner!”

The black haired youth turns, surprised that I am even talking to him, “Yes.”

“A word if you please?”

He motions to Anthony and Terry to go on without him. “What can I do for you?”

“Well, I've seen you staring at Ginny Weasley lately...”

His expression darkens, “Oh, is this the part where you tell me that she's yours and to stay away from her? I thought you were dating one of your chasers! How about leaving some for the rest of us?”

I chuckle, “You've got it all wrong Michael. This is the part where I tell you to stop wasting time and ask her to Hogsmeade already. Listen, she's kind of hung up on me and you'd really be helping me out. She's a nice girl, but she's not my type. You'd be doing me a big favor.”

“You seriously don't like her that way?”

“Right in one! If you need me to at some point, I’ll put in a good word with her brothers for you.” He doesn’t need to know how little my word means with them at the moment.

Corner looks gobsmacked. “You’d really do that for me. Wow, thanks! Any idea how I should go about it?”

“Just go up and ask her. The straightforward approach is the best one. You’ll probably get full marks if you do it in front of other people. I bet if you do it in front of Ron, he’ll get angry and then Ginny will accept just to spite him. If I’m around she’ll definitely accept to try and make me jealous...”

“I don’t know if I want her going out with me because of that,” he answers skeptically.

“Look, getting the date is just a matter of getting a yes or a no from a girl. Once you’re on the date, it’s all on you and what you make of it. What’s wrong?”

“She’s going to be comparing me to you.” Shit! Come on Corner! Grow a pair!

“Just be you, Michael. You’ll never know if you don’t try. If she’s not into you, then you get some practice in for the next girl you ask out.”

I make sure to sit with Katie at lunch when Corner goes up to Ginny to make his move. Hermione’s still fuming so Bell, Spinnet, and Johnson are much better company, though Fred and George still don’t look too happy to see me. I see Ginny cast a glance in my direction as she loudly accepts his invitation.

Good luck there Corner, I’ll be rooting for you.

“Now that I’ve finally got you all here, let’s talk about the Unforgivables.” I was missing the first day and four Slytherins ended up getting sick after a rather unfortunate accident in Herbology last week, so this is the first time the whole class is together.

Most everyone has heard about what he did with the spiders for the third years and above already. They all had this dazed look of glee plastered on their faces – oh sorry, I meant intellectual curiosity. Anyone care for a taste of the forbidden fruit?

Moody's eye swerves and locks on me, "Tell the class, Potter, how long did you have aches in your body after being on the receiving end of a Cruciatus curse?"

"Six days."

"That's right class! Six days of feeling miserable! All from less than ten seconds of a curse and if you dig a bit deeper, guess what? Potter got off lucky. Most people are pretty much incapacitated by the curse. Potter kept his wits about him and that's why he's alive today. Longer exposure to the curse can do bad things to a person – things from which people don't recover."

There are two people in the room who know what he means. A sideways glance at Neville and I see his lip quivering slightly.

"So, let's take a gander at our little spider and see how well it does against this curse." He enlarges it and I notice him silently casting a weak sonorous charm on it with a slight of hand. Moody's a crafty bugger. We're really going to hear it scream.

"Crucio!" That thing really lets loose. I can emphasize with it. He lets up after about five seconds and the thing can barely move. "Back in the war, Death Eaters would use that curse to incapacitate their opponents and then have their way with them. That's why using this curse on another human being will get you a one way ticket to Azkaban."

He moves on to demonstrate the Imperius curse, making that lethargic spider ignore its injuries and jump around the room as if nothing were wrong. Moody delights in having it go after the Slytherins. I make no move as it leaps onto my desk. Trying to picture how much pain I'd be in if someone made me do that right after cursing me, I decide that the killing will be a mercy killing.

I know the way Moody operates. He's gauging our reactions, even if this isn't an Auror training class or private dueling instruction. James had him as an off and on tutor for almost a full year before the war forced Alastor to focus his attention solely on the war effort.

Ron on the other hand, practically wets himself.

Eventually, Moody has his fill of sadistic joy – probably why Snivellus wants to teach the class so badly – and makes his thrall hop down and move slowly down the center of the aisle – dead spider walking. Moody starts it from the back of the room to drive home that he's forcing the creature to walk to its death. It's the same creepy shit that Death Eaters would do with children in front of their parents. He makes it climb on the empty desk at the front of the room and execute a bow for the class.

Then he kills it. Even the Slytherins look pretty shaken up.

"You've all heard about this little demonstration, but there's something the other classes have been keeping from you. I've been given special dispensation to use the Imperius curse on the lot of you. The Headmaster is here to supervise." Albus Dumbledore suddenly appears standing by the blackboard and I curse myself for not looking for any signs of disillusionment or notice-me-not fields. This is Alastor fucking Moody after all! He's the same wizard who killed a Death Eater trying to break into his home by animating a hidden Muggle bear trap and decapitating the bastard. Then, he used the headless body to strangle the guy's shocked partner! Most people know him as Mad Eye Moody. A few of the Order members called him Hardcore Moody – with good reason.

"Good day to you all. What you are about to experience will no doubt amuse you, but let me remind you that the person about to do the soft shoe on the desk could just as easily be ordered to take their wand and cause you great bodily harm."

With the Headmaster's warning, Moody proceeds. Again, I notice that Moody seems to heap a bit more humiliation upon the Slytherins. I don't join in with everyone's nervous tittering. This spell isn't a toy! I'm

actually surprised that Dumbledore and the Board let this go. Finally it's my turn.

I feel the pleasant warmth wash over me and the voice commanding me to hop onto the table. My hands tremble as I start to rise. The voice becomes more demanding, but I find I'm actually getting traction against it! Either Moody's gotten really weak over the years or, I've gotten stronger – much stronger. Powerful or strong willed folks can break the hold over time, but James could never shrug it off like I can now – the only way I can properly describe it is “wicked!”

Barely out of my chair, I break the spell's hold on me and return to my seat. Moody and Dumbledore both look shocked. Moody tries again. Nope! It's not happening.

On the third try, I speak up, “If the killing curse didn't work, why do you think this one would?”

Dumbledore laughs, “At this point in the lecture, I intended to have Alastor attempt the curse on my person and command me to slay you all, but as Mr. Potter here has demonstrated, a sufficiently strong-minded and powerful wizard or witch can resist the curse and overcome its enthralling effect. Well done, indeed!”

Moody gives me a single point for standing up to the Imperius curse, but says that having that ability is worth more than he could ever give me. He holds Neville after class, who asks me to wait for him. Hermione practically bolts from the room dragging Ron with her. I've got to watch myself; she's radiating jealousy and anger right now. Dumbledore just basically told her that I am either more strong willed or more powerful than she is or will likely ever be. The truth hurts, no two ways about it.

Five minutes goes by and I almost give up and start heading for dinner when he comes out holding a plant book in his hands.

“Sorry Harry, he wanted to give me this book and to make sure I wasn't too upset by today's lecture.”

“Are you okay?” It makes sense, Frank and Mad Eye ran in the same circles. He’s a callous bastard, but he has a heartbeat like the rest of us.

“I’ll get by. Harry, I’m tired of being a joke like I was in Transfiguration today. I’m tired of people laughing at me. I want to be more like you. You said we could go get a wand that suits me. Can we still do that?”

It will cut into even further into my “date” with Katie, but this isn’t the first time a Longbottom ever asked a Potter for help or vice versa. “It’ll be tight, but I’ll make it happen. We’ll have to go bright and early. If we’re in and out of Ollivander’s quick enough, we can stop by and see your parents.”

“Thanks Harry.”

Friday night, I finish my shift in the Ward rather uneventfully for a change and make my way to the room that once held the Mirror of Erised. It’s so far out of the way that no one would be out here with only a little over one hour before curfew. Still, I drop a proximity warning spell in the corridor outside before I enter and remove my invisibility cloak. On the floor, I spread out the map and scan the area around the room and for two particular names. Dumbledore is in his office with Sprout and Moody is in his quarters with Bartemius Crouch of all people. Now that is one seriously strange duo, but he’s a Ministry type in charge of making this tournament happen and Moody is here for security. Politics sure does make for unusual bedfellows.

With both of the people who could possibly be wandering around and detect what I am about to do otherwise occupied, I summon Dobby and put a silencing charm on the walls of the room.

I start with Dobby tossing small rubber balls at me – object to object Transfiguration. The balls become parchment, straw, metal and wood without changing shape. I’m through the first exercise; change the material, onto the next exercise. I leave the material intact, but change the form. Soon I have a pile of rubber chickens, cats, squirrels and flowers lying atop the ball shaped objects. The elf starts

varying the speeds at my request and they become harder to hit. It helps my aim as I begin the third progression changing both material and shape. I'm grossly out of form. If the "real" James Potter walked in at this moment, I doubt he could resist mocking me.

Even so, amongst the pile of debris in front of me are real flowers, broken plates, a tuba and two chickens being chased by a ginger-haired cat of indeterminate sexuality. I sort of flubbed the wand movements on that one. At least, "it" won't be around long enough to get all angry with me.

A surge of power through my wand and I cancel all my spells watching the three balls that had been running around the room bounce off a wall and come to rest. I wandlessly summon them and return them to my elf, because it's conjuration time!

While the elf sends them at me even faster, I conjure barriers of stone, tin and glass. I shoot large balls to intercept them working on both my aim and speed. I levitate the stone shield wandlessly and use my wand to cast the clearview charm on it allowing me to see through the shield. Feeling the drain of the multiple spells, I push harder blocking with my construct as I send my own volley of rubber balls out of my wand at the elf who laughs and scampers to an elf. Damn, he's fast. It's probably a good thing there's never been a house elf uprising.

Twenty minutes of this and I'm spent. At the peak of James' training he could do this for almost forty-five, but considering this is only my fourth time really cutting loose, I know I can be easily at James' level by the winter holidays as my technique improves and I figure out how to best expend my power. How far I can go beyond that is the real question! Conjuring and Transfiguration are two of the most wasteful of the magical branches. Charms, jinxes, hexes, and animation are straightforward power to purpose, whereas the other two leave too much power "on the table."

Soon, I will start mixing charms and hexes into the mixture and I consider how I can make my exercises more practical by setting up targets while having Dobby and someone or something else hurl the balls at me. I could charm a barrel and make it into some kind of pitching machine like they use in American baseball.

I spend some time in my Animagus form just to keep in practice. This week was the first time I'd been able to get out and do a bit of running in my pronghorn form at the edge of the Forbidden Forrest. I caught Hagrid watching me once or twice and saw that there were some vegetables left out for me. I thought about taking them, but they smelled tainted. Sure enough, Hagrid wants to "examine" his new visitor. If he didn't find me interesting, he'd probably butcher me and feed me to those wretched blast end thingamajigs he's breeding. Really, he's a gentle guy – honest.

I'd stay longer, but we're meeting Dung near the Shrieking Shack tomorrow early. He keeps several Portkeys on his body to assist in his "profession" – whatever the hell that is! It's best that I don't ask. For a few more of my galleons, he's giving us a lift to Diagon Alley. He even has a line on a Pensieve for me. Thirty two hundred galleons is a bit steep, but I'm guessing five hundred of that is going right into Dung's bottomless pockets, but I can always sign a note against the Potter fortune and for a nasty rate of interest the Goblins at Gringotts would jump on it.

Covered in soot and glammers I stumble back through the Floo at the Hogshead. My Occlumency holds as I pass through Aberforth's age line and I head out the door trying not to draw too much attention to myself.

What a waste of a day! Neville got his wand after trying nearly every single wand in Ollivander's shop. It took two bloody hours! Furthermore, despite my repeated requests, the old man refused to sell me a spare until I'm seventeen. While Neville was visiting Frank and Alice, Dung and I went into Knockturn Alley to check out this Pensieve. I should have known when the rat bastard shopkeeper wanted fifty galleons up front to test it out. It was suspicious enough when he tried to get me to buy or get out at ten minutes into the memory. I refused and at fifteen minutes, the blasted thing quit working and tossed me out rather violently into some crystal ware that was no doubt arranged for me to break. I wasted another twenty minutes bickering with the bastard when he gets some goons to

come out after us for the extra money the slimy git was demanding. I led them off and told Dung to get Neville back to Hogsmeade or else!

I rub the spot on my shoulder where one winged me with a bludgeoner before I could disillusion myself. Once disillusioned, I was able to get out my invisibility cloak and really disappear while they were looking for distortion patterns.

I quickly use my wand to clean all the dirt and grime off of me and get rid of the glammers. I hurry towards the little hill where I'm supposed to meet Katie for our picnic while brushing up on my excuses. I'm only one hour late, okay an hour and a half, she'll understand right?

The blanket and basket are still there. Aw, she left a note for me. The note is in a red envelope. I wonder what it has to say.

"You unbelievable arse! I can't believe you stood me up! I should have listened to Angie and Alicia! Here I was defending you to them and telling them that you aren't really an arrogant little berk! Turns out I was wrong! I hope you and Neville effing Longbottom had fun wherever you went to on your super secret mission that you refused to tell me about! Here's a news flash for you Mister Harry Potter! You're not a very good boyfriend! Maybe you should try growing up and getting a little maturity into that pompous block of stone that sits between your shoulders."

Oddly enough, the cracks about maturity actually hurt a little. No doubt "Potter the Arsehole" stories are already spreading around the castle. Part of me wouldn't mind telling her that I took a good friend to see visit his sick parents because it was the right thing to do and watch her try and back pedal and apologize. The rest of me is a bit relieved that whatever it was, it's over and I can stop pretending that I wanted to date her in the first place. Maybe I should date a few more girls and treat them poorly too?

From behind, I heard a couple of sniggers and turn to see Fred and George standing there each with a set of Omnioculars.

"We figure Katie deserves to see you get chewed out. Since our dates are back at the castle listening to her cry in her cups, we didn't have anything else to do."

"Good for you boys. You deserve a biscuit." I say in a mocking tone and take one out of the basket and then realizing that Fred and George have been here waiting for me, I put it right back where it was. Eating isn't really a good idea.

"Do you know what I want to know, Fred?" They start circling around the picnic blanket crossing each other's path.

"Pray do tell, George?"

"Why is it when we spoke to that one despicable wretch of a Ravenclaw did he say that Harry here encouraged him to ask our little sister out? Take a problem off his hands, so to speak? He seems to have a mysterious way with girls doesn't he? Rather arrogant if you ask me." They must be plenty angry. They're not doing that whole finishing each other's sentences thing.

"Too true, brother of mine! I was wondering the same thing myself. Perhaps you'd care to comment on that Harry, or is it Percy Potter?" The jibe at me being Percy is pretty low, even for them.

"I say, should we curse him? He'd look good with some good old Bat Bogey's flying about?"

"Oh what a splendid..." I'd lost track of who is who, but the moment they reached for their wands mine is out. They had Omnis in their hands and I am a very fast draw.

"Think again."

"Perhaps not then, but you only delay the inevitable Potter. We would have let you off easier, if you had just taken it like a man. Oh, who are we kidding, we wouldn't, but as dear Katie so eloquently expressed, we to have doubts about your maturity. I predict you're going to have a miserable year."

“Let us go now brother before we incur the wrath of Harry Potter.”

“Quite right. He does seem to be an angry individual.”

“Perhaps he needs some time to think about it? Oh Blanket!”

The moment one of them says that, the blanket rises up and starts wrapping itself around me. They didn't mess with the food; they charmed the blanket and put a voice activated trigger on it. It's got a sticking charm on it too. My wand and arm are pinned to my chest leaving me wrapped in the colorful blanket. Quickly, I evaluate my options. I could Apparate, but I'm not advertising that today. My Animagus transformation could rip through this, but again not a good idea.

They take several shots with their Omnis of them standing next to my trussed up body and even produce someone's wizarding camera to take some more keepsakes. I must admit the one with me floating in the air and Fred holding a saw to my stomach like a Muggle stage magician will probably turn out to be a hoot. They make several threatening comments, but they're not Dudley-like thugs. They prefer humiliation over physical beatings, things like making people's hair fallout or vanishing clothes, pranks in food or drink that turn you different colors or into an animal.

By not begging for my release, I deny them their fun. Finally they grow bored trying to get a response and simply roll me down the hill. The Weasley twins turn and start back towards the castle.

“Hard to believe we borrowed Dad's car to rescue this piece of rubbish? Or gave him our map?”

I speak up for the first time, “Don't kid yourselves, you would have found another reason to use the car at some point. From the way you two drove it, it looked like you'd done it before. Considering the map was made by James Potter, Sirius Black, Lupin, and Pettigrew, you were just returning my rightful property.”

They pause for a moment. Apparently, they never knew who the Marauders actually were. “Oh, not only is he poor with the ladies, he's

a bit of an ingrate as well. Know this, Poncey Potter: we no longer consider you a friend of the family. We're not even certain you're a true Gryffindor. You step out of line and we'll be there to make your life a living hell."

"Well spoken, brother! Do we tell McGonagall that he'll be late for his detention?"

"Are you sure you want to talk to her, George?"

"I thought I was George. Quite right, sorry old bean, unlike that berk Corner, we're not inclined to do you any favors there, Harold. Better luck next time..."

I figure they'll have a time release on it for either just before or after my detention is supposed to begin. One has me sprinting and making a bloody fool of myself and the other ensures that I do get into more trouble.

I wait five more minutes to make certain they don't come back for more photographic fun and transform ripping through the blanket with my animal form. The shoulder still hurts from my souvenir to Knockturn, but I was right that the blanket couldn't hold up to my transformation.

Quickly turning back, I grab my wand and cancel the enchantment. My clothes need repair which takes another moment, and I check for any signs of any other recording device or spell. It's tempting to conjure some fake blood and spray it on the tattered remains of the blanket and skiv off detention to have some tea with Hagrid and see what happens when I don't return to the castle, but I've had enough fun for one day.

I don't have time for an idiotic prank war. I'll try ignoring them at first, but if they persist, I'll go into the memories of James Potter and show them what nasty looks like – shit we wouldn't even use on Snape.

My day gets worse upon reentering the Gryffindor common room. Detention with McGonagall consisted of her lecturing me for forty-five minutes before making me write lines about the importance of safety in the classroom along with a bonus assignment on Galbreth's seven principles of advanced switching spells. I'd have rather just started on that instead of the lines.

Walking in, I see the twins had been busy. At first I thought they things are being set up for Hermione's birthday, but all the streamers lead back to pictures of me and my earlier encounter with the twins. Scooping up one of the pictures, I see I was right. This picture is a keeper. Looking around the common room is full of the older students. The Omnis are passed around like party favors. Everyone is quietly watching me. Katie's there glaring daggers.

I slide it under my arm and start up the stairs when Angelina's voice stops me. "Don't you have anything to say for yourself, Potter?"

"I suppose, I could say nice decorations and good night. Sorry about the picnic Katie – nice Howler. I got tied up where I was and couldn't get back in time and as you can see, I got tied up again. Maybe some other time," her expression hardens, "then again, maybe not."

Katie remains sullen, but apparently Johnson is angry enough for the both of them, "You realize if there was Quidditch this year, I'd bounce your scrawny little arse from the team right now. I have to decide over the course of the year whether keeping you is worth the trouble."

That would have set the "old me" off. Now I stop on the steps and stare back at her. A few choice words in the ear of Puddlemere's General Manager could work their way out amongst the scouts and Angie could easily get screwed out of a shot in the Spring League until she's out of Hogwarts. No, I'm not that cruel, not today at least. I want to find a bathtub and soak my shoulder and try to forget this day ever happened. "Assuming you're Captain next year Angelina, you can make whatever decisions you feel will help the team win."

Neville's waiting for me when I get upstairs. On my way to my detention I checked the map and made certain he was safely back at the castle. "Safely" is a misleading word as he is stuck to the wall and

with his teeth grown to a ridiculous size. I go to release him, but Ron stops me.

“Harry, what the hell are you doing with Ginny?”

“I saw Corner liked her. I told him he should ask her out?”

“But you snogged her!”

I shrink Neville’s teeth back and look at Ron, “And you snogged Angelina and Alicia that day, big effing deal.”

“Not to her, you prat!”

Maybe I should just have someone stun me, screw the hot soak. I consider letting Neville try that with his new wand, but then discard the idea. Neville shooting a spell at me? It will take some time before I’m that comfortable with him. “Would you listen to yourself? Up until a few hours ago, I was dating Katie and not your sister. I saw that Corner bloke really was interested and I thought Ginny might enjoy going out with someone who was really in to her.”

“You were leading her on!”

“How so, buying her a birthday gift? Being nice to her? Going into a closet with her at a rigged party game? Rigged by your two brothers? Where were you today? Hanging out with Hermione? Did you go to stores together? Eat some Ice Cream? Are you leading her on?”

“Hermione! We’re just friends!”

“My point exactly! I’ve told Ginny that I’m not interested at this time, but everyone around here seems to believe that I’ve either proposed to Katie or Ginny depending on who you talked to.”

“You’re a right foul git! You know that?” When he runs out of arguments, he insults. It usually doesn’t take long. Want to know what this feels like, go find someone ten years younger than you and argue with them and see how happy you are with the results.

I freed Neville from the wall, “Is that so, because I was late for a date? How long did you all let Neville hang out here on the wall?”

“Where were you today?”

I jerk my thumb at Neville, “With him.”

“Where?”

“It’s none of your business, Ron. Drop it.”

He leaves with his knickers in a twist. I wonder how much everyone else heard. I glance at Neville, who’s rubbing his shoulders. “How long did they leave you up there?”

“I couldn’t see the clock, so I’m not sure. They wanted to know where we went and I didn’t tell them. So, they left me here to think about it.”

“Why didn’t you tell them?”

He points at the wall. “Most people always do stuff to me – case in point. You’re one of the first people to do something for me. You skived off a date with one of the prettiest girls in our house to help me out...” Neville trailed off not know what else to say.

I clap him on the shoulders. “I’d do it again too mate. So, you wanna try out that new wand of yours?”

“Sure” I wince realizing that when the Hat catches wind of this conversation it’ll start in on me about being a poof. Our last few sentences have so many homosexual connotations that it isn’t funny.

“Anyone show you how to make a Protego yet?”

“No.”

“Well let’s get started.”

I throw myself into my work over the next six weeks. People stop asking me about the fight at the World Cup. People stop asking me about Katie Bell dumping me. For the most part, people stop talking to me, which is no longer as annoying as it once was. I recall Hermione coolly thanking me for the gift certificate to Flourish and Bott's that I picked up for her. She seems miffed that I never ask her to check over my homework anymore and am getting very high marks. She occasionally asks me Transfiguration trivia to see how much I know without asking outright. I feign ignorance on some of the problems just to make her feel better.

The problem with Hermione is I don't feel like we're meshing anymore. My new memories have upset the apple cart. Instead of my brilliant best friend, she's this brilliant kid I know. The worst part is she's acting like it's a bloody competition! It's just schoolwork, try fighting and losing a war. Of course the whole situation with the Weaselys has Hermione putting a bit of distance with me.

Poor Corner was ceremoniously dumped by an angry Ginny, who somehow decided this was completely my fault. The downside was a smack, a few rude names, the Ravenclaws all thinking I'm some kind of gigolo, the Hufflepuffs willing to believe whoever's mouth is moving at the time, and some renewed grumbling from Ron and Hermione.

Isn't it interesting how someone can go from being a "hero" for standing up to Snape one week to a "selfish, immature prat" shortly thereafter? I don't attend classes with people – I attend them with sheep.

The one big upside is being left alone by the youngest Weasley and the "unofficial" Harry Potter fan club seems to have gone underground for now. Ron's been much colder to me, but he's always been a follower and between my gaff with Ginny coupled with his brother's working on him seems to have driven a wedge between us. Well, it happened to the Beatles, it was bound to happen to us. Hopefully, I go on to future success like Paul and don't end up getting cut down before my time like John.

The twins have caught me a few times; pink robes, purple hair and the ever popular Pinocchio nose, but I have thwarted easily twice that

number. Sadly, I've had to ask Sir Nicolas to keep an eye on them as well. He does so grudgingly, but out of respect for my decision to help the Baron. I choose not to respond, which will either make them try something more risky or make them give up. The riskiest thing they've tried so far was messing with my Firebolt on the day of tryouts for the All-House Quidditch squad.

I didn't have to lift a finger as the twins tripped the anti-theft charms and got really nice jolt. There's a reason that it's the most expensive broom in the world. I calmly treated them and recommended that they get bed rest. I don't know what broke my heart worse when they didn't make the squad or when Cho Chang beat out Malfoy for the reserve seeker spot. .

A wailing Moaning Myrtle, followed by Peeves who was being chased by the Bloody Baron through his dormitory at two in the morning and then again at four had nothing to do with it. At least that's what I heard happened. Cedric Diggory didn't even sign up for tryouts. He's got his heart set on the Tournament. With Hooch choosing the lineup, I didn't have to worry about the fickle winds of public opinion.

My new favorite hangout is the Ward; people don't come there except when they're sick. That suits me just fine. Poppy lets me stay even when I'm not on duty and she's been thoroughly impressed with my improving Potions skills. I can see that she's already trying to encourage me towards a future as a healer and to forget all this Quidditch nonsense. When I'm not there, I go down to Hagrid's hut and help him grade papers and tend his "pets." I suppose at some point people are going to start calling me anti-social. Sorry, I can't help that I want conversation with adults, though with Hagrid it's a bit of a stretch at times.

As for Snape, I started to go to Flitwick and ask him about a name Remus Lupin supposedly mentioned – Sarah Underhill. I stopped short and instead asked him an inane question about dueling that I already knew the answer to. I'd work on another way of getting that information out there. I don't need to tear open an old wound for a nice man that probably still haunts him.

As Neville and I watch the students from Beauxbatons exit their carriage led by an absolutely stunning blonde and their massive Headmistress, he smiles goofily at me.

“Would you look at her, Harry?” he whispers.

I sigh looking at yet another example of the forbidden fruit and hope Neville is talking about the blonde, unless he likes them large and in charge. Hell, that little one, she’s a forbidden fruit stand! “She’s eye candy for certain. I’m looking to see who might be their Seeker.” Fair play says the teams aren’t allowed to practice until they’ve arrived here. That means we’re at least three or four practices behind the other schools. If Krum isn’t his school’s champion, I get to fly against him unless he isn’t interested in our little games.

Being a fourth year again is one big effing bore. Basically, I belong to nowhere. I’d rather be hanging out with Ollie and Penny and working on my own. Instead, I have to skulk around the castle to find time to train myself and worry that someone’s going to spot me. Repeating Charms work that James breezed through once already. Here’s a big shocker! The stars are pretty much in the same spot as they were back in the 1970’s. I spend most of that class staring at our instructor’s firm little tushie. Trust me, all “this” gets old real quick. For anyone that’s ever dreamed of going back and doing it over, here’s my recommendation – don’t!

The only bright spot so far has been helping Neville out. Despite being a day older than me, he’s my kid brother. He’s already asked if I want to visit this summer. He’s stuck by me, a bit like a lost puppy and now we’re essentially the “Gryffindor Outcasts”. Maybe we could pair up with Millicent and Daphne and all go to this Yule Ball thing together? A really cruel part of me wants to ask Ginny to it and see how much trouble that would stir up. I think going “stag” is in order, which is oh so true with me.

With his new wand, he’s not exactly setting the world on fire, but on the other hand, he isn’t setting other things on fire either. Longbottom is much improved and there are substantially fewer mishaps in Charms and Transfiguration, but he has a ways to go. Moody’s given

him an occasional compliment. The big thing is building up his confidence.

Defense is fairly strange this year. Sometimes Moody is boring as hell and then other times he comes up with something fairly twisted. I was right, he's even worse with teenagers than I apparently am! He spends almost every night in his quarters with Bartemius Crouch. A couple of nights, Crouch has been in Moody's quarters alone, or I'll spot Crouch in the hallways and occasionally with Dumbledore. Once he was in Snape's supply closet! That is being pretty anal about the arrangements.

They announce that knockout blonde, Fleur Delacour as the Beauxbatons champion. The princess does her best beauty pageant imitation and is accepting all the well-wishes from her teary-eyed and jealous classmates. James Potter knew enough conversational French for me to recognize most of the opinions she's been expressing and the insults she's been hurling with a smile at all the idiots gawking at her. She's a mean spirited wench who hides behind being having some Veela blood in her. It's funny watching people get stupid around her. Ron's especially funny. Um, I hate to rain on your parade, but you were selected by a goblet and not your peers there.

"...and the champion from Durmstrang is ...Viktor Krum!" Most everyone cheers, but I groan. There goes my chance to fly against the best in the world. Too bad, I would have really liked that. He gets the clapping and hugging treatment as I wonder how good his understudy is. Even if I had lost to Krum, if I had kept him in check long enough for the Chasers to win, I'd be a lock for the next National team. Well, I'll have to settle for trouncing whomever they stick on a broom against me.

I'm lost in thought until Dumbledore announces Cedric Diggory and the Hufflepuff table goes absolutely berserk. Looks like his gamble paid off. I clap for him, while I scan the room and spot Johnson, Davies, and some of the Slytherins who were certain they were going to be our champion.

The Headmaster is going into his speech again when the Goblet of Fire comes to life for the fourth time. There's a confused hush over the crowd as he snatches the slip of paper out of the air. He looks stunned for a minute like he got one of those fortune cookies Lily used to enjoy opening up.

His piercing eyes search the crowd and stop on me. This can't be good.

"Harry Potter!"

Yeah, definitely not good.

Author's notes - Hope you enjoyed the chapter. Be sure to let me know what you think of it by reviewing, or commenting in the forums on FFA and DLP. There might be a bit of a delay in the next chapter because I am trying to finish To Fight the Coming Darkness and this weekend I start posting Turn Me

Disclaimer - I do not own Harry Potter. This is a work of fanfiction. Enjoy.

Acknowledgements - First I'd like to thank you readers for waiting for me to come back to this story. As usual, I needed the help of Alpha Fight Club to add the layers of polish to this story that makes it as entertaining as it is. Also, a big round of applause to Aaran St. Vines for the 4 hour turn around in editing services!

Chapter 8 – Censure and Sensibility

How very quaint. My name just popped out of the Goblet of Fire! There's something you don't see everyday.

Neville looks at me questioningly and I shake my head. He was with me for pretty much all of last night, both of us laughing at the Weasley twins getting turned into old men.

With nothing else to do, I stand and make my way forward. There isn't any clapping, just stares and a growing murmur. The murmurs change to grumbles that I'm a dirty cheater. Like I'd have to cheat to get into this tournament if I wanted to!

Dumbledore, of course, has this perplexed look on his face like this was all some ridiculous Arithmancy problem to be solved. He motions for me to head into the holding room and I walk in.

Cedric spots me the moment I stepped in. "Harry? Do they want us back out there?"

I just shake my head and walk to the window looking out on the grounds. I ponder the implications and the suspects. Someone fooled the Goblet into picking a fourth champion. A Weasley prank leaps to mind, however, it's out of Fred and George's league. If they could have put an extra champion in, it would have been themselves or Angelina. Malfoy and the Slytherins have as much cause as any to hate me, but again, putting me in the limelight doesn't fit with Draco's modus operandi.

I'm left with real enemies, people who want me to die – Death Eaters. Snape? No, he's too far under Dumbledore's thumb. The life debt would probably stop him anyway. Durmstrang's Headmaster was a turncoat on his Death Eater buddies. It just didn't seem likely. He wouldn't have an axe to grind against me. Lucius still has pull and I did recently cross swords with him at the inquest. The rest of the bastards wouldn't act without his say so. I should have watched the map last night! Could Peter have gotten into the castle? Those are the four Death Eaters that I know about. What about the ones I don't?

I'm so consumed by my thoughts I don't realize other people are filling the room. Dumbledore walks briskly over to me. "Harry did you place your name into the cup?"

"Of course he did!" Snape yells. Several other break into shouting matches. The French Headmistress is demanding Crouch and Bagman do something.

"No." I shoot a dirty look at His Greasiness, though I prefer using something a bit more lethal.

"Did you have anyone place your name in the cup?"

"No."

This questioning continues for a moment and I'm starting to lose what little is left of my calm. The line that sets me off comes from the prissy little French "Tinkerbell"- Delacour.

In her best, disgusted voice she loudly complains. "Zis boy is going to compete, ee is too leetle!"

Yeah, that does it. I've officially had enough.

"I've got your 'leetle boy' right here, Princess!" I follow with a rude hand gesture. Yeah, just call me "Ambassador Potter", expert at foreign diplomacy and purveyor of international goodwill. Turning right into Dumbledore's face, I tear into him. "You have teachers, ghosts, paintings and elves all over this damn castle! You mean to tell me

that you didn't have anyone watching the goblet! Are you really that stupid?"

It's probably the first time in decades anyone has laid into the venerable Albus Dumbledore like that. I really can kill a conversation.

McGonagall screeches, "Mr. Potter you will address the Headmaster with respect and conduct yourself with dignity!"

I avoid Dumbledore's direct gaze, I don't know how long I could keep him out of my mind and it would be the start of a conversation I'm not ready to have with him.

Both the visiting school leaders are demanding explanations. Crouch and Bagman and most anyone else are arguing about rules. I hear a faint buzzing – Muffilato! I move close enough to Dumbledore to overhear.

"I can go get the Veritaserum, Headmaster. If the boy is lying, we'll soon know." Snape says.

Dumbledore starts to respond, but I fire back, "I'll go three drops if you will, Snape."

"Very well then, boy, I'm not afraid of anything you can ask me. I, on the other hand, would be very interested in your answers to many questions."

"Severus, that won't be necessary." Dumbledore says.

I continue ignoring the Headmaster. "Don't be so sure Snape, your Death Eater Pardon extends to acts committed as a Death Eater. It doesn't cover anything you may or may not have done prior. Hermione wasn't the only student to ever dabble with Polyjuice here was she?"

That stops him cold in his tracks. I know Snape couldn't have entered me in the contest, but I know he'd try and use it to get information about Sirius, publically implicating me in his escape. Expelling me wouldn't directly harm me. I'd be willing to go ahead and get the hell

out of here. Of course, Snape would probably end up in Azkaban for murder, so let's see how far he's willing to push it?

Before I got James Potter's memories, I had no explanation why Sirius Black wasn't expelled for trying to get Snape killed. Now I had all the pieces to a very ugly picture.

Like I said, Hermione wasn't the only student to ever brew Polyjuice in school. The old "Half Blood Prince" over there dabbled in it quite a bit. For a few weeks in the Marauder's sixth year, he even capitalized on Black's good looks and used his form to have his way with a number of schoolgirls.

Sirius found out about it when a Muggleborn seventh year Prefect named Sarah Underhill came to Black preggies. Only she was one of the few notches not on Black's wand holster. Needless to say, Sirius was intrigued and, after a bit of sleuthing on Padfoot's part, discovered it was Snape trying to destroy Black's reputation and get some quick shags off of girls clearly out of his league.

Angrily, Sirius challenged him to a duel at the shrieking shack knowing Remus would be there. James found out and saved Snape's life – and thus a life debt was born. The whole mess was swept under the rug. Sarah was a girl of strong morals, probably explaining why Sirius never tried. She planned on keeping the "Quarterblood Prince or Princess" and Dumbledore even arranged for an apprenticeship to buy her silence. Three days after her graduation, Sarah and her Muggle family were slaughtered. If Snape didn't do it himself, it was the price he demanded for admission into the Death Eaters. James, Sirius, Peter and Remus were sworn to secrecy about Snape's Polyjuice adventures and Snape about Lupin's "furry problem".

Fortunately, the oaths were for the duration of school. Lily was horrified when James could finally tell her about the whole sordid affair. It explained much of the tension between the Marauders and Snape during their final year. To be honest, I'm curious if I would have been bound by an oath James had made. The expiration of the oath allowed Snape to get Remus fired last year. Hopefully, I can return the favor – in spades!

The man turns on me loathing in his eyes. "I don't know what you are talking about, Potter."

"Their oaths expired too!" I step out of the field of the spell, "Come on Snape. What's three drops among friends?" That draws everyone back towards our conversation.

"Silence!" Dumbledore bellows. Obviously he didn't like the prospect of Hogwarts 'dirty laundry' being aired in front of guests. Good thing this school has so many broom closets otherwise the skeletons would have to be on display in the hallways. "That will be enough. Mr. Potter does not strike me as someone who would enter himself into a dangerous contest. Given the fact that he was assaulted and nearly killed just before the school term began makes it even less likely that he would do so. Our task is to determine how best to proceed."

Durmstrang and Beauxbatons immediately want an additional champion or either me or Cedric disqualified. They bring the Goblet in and have both Cedric and I touch it. Yeah, there's a magical connection there. We have to compete. I didn't expect anything differently; whoever set me up had this planned out. Krum and Delacour are sent to fetch two other students who would be allowed to represent their school, but would not be magically compelled to compete. I enjoy the withering gaze from Fleur as she goes by. Keep on dreaming bitch! It's going to take more than you've got to intimidate me.

Moody points out that someone must have used a Confundus charm on the Goblet and it had to have been a good one to trick it into believing there were four schools to pick from. The scrap of parchment looked like my handwriting, but anyone could have fished one of my assignments out of a bin or nicked one at some point.

By the time the two additional champions arrive along with several other onlookers, the room has become a bit cluttered with people. We're led up to Dumbledore's office. Along the way, the two French witches are speaking in their native tongue, while their Headmistress continues to berate Bagman, Crouch and anyone else unfortunate enough to be next to her. Thanks to James Potter's tutoring, I can follow along with their conversation well enough.

“...and then the rude little twit began disrespecting his Headmaster. These English, they have no manners. Why couldn’t the tournament have been held at Beauxbatons?”

“So, I am being allowed to compete because Harry Potter entered himself in the competition?”

“Yes, Aimee. He claims that someone else entered him, but it sounds to me like the little boy is cashing in on his fame. He is going to get caught in his lie soon enough.”

“Fleur, he is of no consequence. You said he was rude to you so that means he must not even be in puberty yet! This late bloomer cannot be very powerful at all. Let us worry more about the other contestants, like Krum.” Damn that puberty comment kind of stings.

I tap Aimee Beaucourt on her back. The attractive brunette looks back at me. My French is rusty. Technically, I’ve never spoken it before, but I manage to get out. “The other possibility is I am strong enough to resist this tart’s meager aura. Perhaps you should consider that? Of course, I am an uncultured barbarian, so who is to say?”

Thirty minutes later, I’m tired of the death stares from Delacour and Beaucourt. Everyone seems to have moved beyond the fact that someone in this castle is yet again trying to kill me, and now they are focused on how three additional champions requires a change in the order of tasks.

Fawkes seems to be relishing in all the attention. He’s a bit on the oldish side right now. I could only imagine all the cooing those two French wenches would be doing if Fawkes was in its just hatched “Chickadee” form. I slip over to the shelf and pick up the Sorting Hat.

“About time Potter! Mind telling me what in Godric’s shriveled balls is going on?”

“I’ve missed you too Hat. Someone put me into the tournament.”

“Never dull with you around is it?”

“Yeah, maybe they could bring back the Dementors and really make my day!”

“On the bright side, you get to miss as much class as you want for personal training.”

I hadn't really considered the benefits until the Hat mentioned that. The rules they've organized this thing under excuse the champions from the end of the year exams and basically give us a get-out-of-class pass that shouldn't be abused. “Shouldn't” is a lovely word isn't it? I also get a staff advisor to discuss strategies for the ten tasks ahead.

“Who do you think I should pick for my advisor?”

“Depends on if you want to keep your secret. Even one of these worthless drops of sperm will figure it out soon enough, unless you pick Hagrid – he's a bit dim.”

I like Hagrid, but even I concede that the Hat makes a valid point. “Hey! What about you? Can't I pick you?”

“Technically, I am listed as part of the staff in Hogwarts a History. I don't see why not, HJ. Let's see what the old fossil thinks?”

The Hat and I listen in while they continue ironing out the details. I have to stop myself from laughing on several occasions as the Hat silently adds his own commentary. It'll be days before I can look at Madame Maxime without thinking about what she would do to Flitwick.

Crouch looks around, “Perhaps we should have our champions choose their advisors and go ahead and dismiss them before we continue with our discussion?”

The Heads of the school are judges in the competition, so they can't be chosen. A few minutes of discussion later it is stated that Fleur, Viktor, and Cedric were chosen first so, they get first choice for advisors. I'm curious to see who Cedric picks. I doubt he is interested

in the Sorting Hat. Outside of Quidditch, I really don't know much about Diggory.

When his turn comes, Dumbledore asks that he not choose any heads of house, which would impair their duties to the rest of the school.

"I'd like Mr. Moody as my advisor." Smart choice there Cedric. Moody looks somewhat apprehensive; I wonder if he wanted to be my advisor?

When the eyes turn to me, Dumbledore notices that the Hat is on my head and frowns. "Mr. Potter, who did you have in mind for your advisor? As I asked Mr. Diggory, please do not choose any heads of house."

I make a show of thinking it over. I could spend a good portion of the year trying to get Professor Sinistra to be my Mrs. Robinson. She was a Slytherin three years ahead of the Marauders. Her house was probably the only thing that stopped Black from trying anyway.

Oh well, such a relationship would only lead to problems. "I had my hopes set on choosing Professor Snape, but I think I'll take the Sorting Hat as my advisor."

"I'm afraid that's not possible, the advisor needs to be a staff member."

"According to Hogwarts a History, the Sorting Hat is part of the staff."

To the Hat I think, "Doesn't sound like he's buying it. If he makes me pick someone else, should I screw with him and pick Filch?"

"Nice idea there HJ, but you should really leave irritating Dumbledore to me."

Dumbledore actually pulls out the book and consults it. "So it would seem. Mr. Crouch do the rules stipulate that the advisor must be a salaried staff member."

Crouch has good old Percy Weasley checking through the thick tome containing the rules. Three minutes pass before Percy shakes his head and says, "The rules simply state that the advisor be a staff member."

With that avenue cut off Dumbledore again tries to reason with me. "Harry, are you quite certain that it is the best choice? Perhaps Professors Vector or Sinistra? You might even consider Madame Pomfrey, with whom you have developed a good rapport."

"No, I like the Hat on this one. It's the only thing besides Fawkes that's been around to see these tournaments and as much as I like your Phoenix, I don't think we'd be able to communicate well enough to work together."

Fawkes amusedly trills and looks at me. "It's not you, Fawkes. It's me. I doubt they'll be using Basilisks during this. If they do, I'll apologize in advance for not picking you, but in the Hat's defense, it was there too."

While the Phoenix continues laughing at me, Krum scoffs and addresses me for the first time, "You expect me to believe that you fought a Basilisk? I had thought you just a liar before, now I see you are a braggart as well."

I guess I won't be getting the bastard's autograph anytime soon. "Believe what you want to believe. I don't really care. If you ask nicely enough, I'll even show you the body."

It doesn't take me but a minute to size up Viktor Krum. He's everything Draco wishes he could be, Quidditch phenom, international superstar, and Igor Karkaroff's little apprentice.

The Bulgarian smiles a predatory look at me. "We will see what I believe when the first round of Dueling begins, child. I will not go easy on you."

JP was just as big of a prick when Krum was still in nappies. I bait him a bit more, "You may be something else on a broom Krum, but

down here on the ground, you're just like the rest of us mortals. When push comes to shove, you'll find I can push really hard."

"We shall see if you have any skill to back up your arrogance."

"Mr. Potter! Mr. Krum! Now is not the time for petty bickering. I will ask one last time, are you certain that you really want the Sorting Hat as your advisor?"

"Quite certain."

"Very well. Champions, you are dismissed. Tomorrow your wands will be weighed and you will be expected to speak briefly with the press."

"Hey Hat! Think I can wipe that fucking grin off his face?"

"I'll be curious to see, but you shouldn't underestimate any of them. Other than Diggory, assume every one of them has had dueling training. I rarely find myself saying this and I sooner let the fossil stick his aged pecker in my mouth before saying it aloud, but thank you HJ."

"Why Hat, you're nothing but an old softy!" I pull it off my head before it can give me a reply, which probably would have traumatized me.

Leaving the staircase with the hat under my arm, Cedric stops me and waits for the other four to head out. "A word Potter. You really didn't enter this tournament?"

"No."

Cedric scrunches his brow in deep thought. We've flown against each other, but never really had much in the way of conversations. "Well, for what its worth and seeing all that went on back there, I believe you. Still, you know this isn't going to go over well with the rest of the school."

"Why do you think that?"

“Well, for one thing, there’re a lot of rumors circulating about you. You got out of taking Potions with Snape. Outside of Slytherin, who wouldn’t want that? That’s been bugging lots of people in both Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff. Most people see you getting special treatment and they don’t like it.”

“Fine, I’ll trade them for every year something trying to kill me and see how they like it!”

“Hey, don’t hex the messenger, Potter. I said I believe you. I’m telling you that not too many others are going to see it that way and they’re going to act like jealous prats. Everyone wanted to be in this tournament and it’ll look to them like they’re changing it to let you compete. It’s not fair, but that’s the way it is! If you think the Slytherins have been giving you shit before, just wait until tomorrow.”

The Hat chimes in, “Diggory is right Potter. I’ve heard you’re on thin ice in your own house right now.”

“I’m used to being a pariah. I’ll get by.”

The Hufflepuff smiles good naturedly, “I speak to some of my friends and make certain they hear from me that you didn’t enter the tournament. Hell, you’ve got so many rumors circulating around that I’m not even sure what to believe! I’m sure the fourth year girls in my house will be torn about who to root for.”

“Why?”

“You mean you haven’t heard about the Harry Potter shrine they have? I think Hannah Abbott has it the worst.”

“Please tell me you’re kidding.”

Laughing, he continues, “All I’m going to say is, just make sure to vanish you’re hair and toenail clippings. Megan Jones spent the summer in the tropics and swears she learned how to make a voodoo doll.”

I groan while the Hat cackles. "I can see the headlines, 'Harry Potter's Hufflepuff Harem!' Wait until I see that Skeeter woman!"

I shove the Hat under my armpit and hope I smell ripe right about now as Cedric laughs, "Well, it's almost curfew and if I hurry, I can swing by Ravenclaw and let Cho know that she's the new starter for the All-House team."

"You and her, huh?"

"Not yet, but maybe soon. Keep a lid on that rumor for now and I won't let the 'Harem' know that you know about them. You realize we're going to end up dueling each other twice at some point?"

"I'll go easy on you, Cedric."

"Your mistake then. I'm in this to win it."

"Fair enough. No holding back on either of our parts. Good luck to you, Cedric."

"To you as well Harry."

The Fat Lady is looking at me with scorn as I approach. "Gryffindor is no house for cheaters young man."

"Save the lectures and open the door – Honor and Unity." I say the passphrase.

"That's the old one."

"Who changed it?"

The woman snorted, "That would be Prefect Angelina Johnson." Oh, good to see there is no bitterness there from Miss Johnson.

"Would you be so kind to announce me and ask that someone open the door in that case?"

“No. There’s a meeting in progress and they asked me not to disturb them. I was told that if you arrived, to have you wait outside and they will come get you when the meeting has concluded.”

“Last I checked I was part of this house.”

“Actions speak louder than words in Godric’s house, young man, and I don’t approve of your actions!” Several nearby paintings cheered her dressing down.

I was tempted to respond, but the Hat beat me to it. “I happen to know a thing or two about the real Godric Gryffindor, you faded remnant of magic. They took his painting down in the twelve hundreds, because at night he kept going from frame to frame diddling any female he could find!”

“Well I never!”

“Maybe you should and you wouldn’t have such a stick up your arse! Now, as Potter recently discovered, I am considered part of the Hogwarts staff and the override phrase is Twilight Thestral.”

Despite her loud protests, the portrait swung open and I stepped through.

On the other side, all of Gryffindor is waiting for me, like some kind of showdown. The seventh year prefect Holly Lynch, cousin of the Irish National Seeker looked at me and then at Angelina questioningly. “Potter! You’ll wait outside. We’re holding a meeting of censure and we’ll get you when we’re ready to hear from the accused.”

Censure – I hadn’t heard that word in awhile. It’s where the House collectively disavows the actions of one of its members. It is purely a symbolic and public rebuking. Two of the Marauders greatest pranks skirted close enough to the line where they actually held the vote, but both of them were just too damn funny for the vote to carry the majority.

Angelina’s never been one to hold her tongue. “What have you got to say for yourself, Cheater?”

"I don't have to say a damn thing to you, Johnson."

"Longbottom admitted that you knew how to get by an Age Line."

Neville's face turns an angry shade of purple. "I also said I was with him most of the night last night and that he didn't enter himself in the contest!" The only real bright spot in this stupid mess is Neville showing a bit of a spine.

"That's right. You said 'most' not 'all'. Harry was just using you for an alibi and you're just too dim to see it! Wake up Longbottom! He used you! You, Potter, have gotten a bit big for your britches and need to be taken down a peg!" If Angie was a dog, they might have to check her for rabies right about now.

"I'll say this nice and slowly so that even a jealous bint like you can understand me. I did not enter my name in this tournament! Someone else put me in it hoping I will get hurt. People have died in these contests. If you think I did it for fame, how much more famous can I get? The thousand galleons? I've got plenty more than that sitting in my trust vault. When I turn seventeen, there's more than I could ever spend waiting for me."

Angelina practically snarls at me. "Quit lying! It's obvious you cheated, Potter. Mark my words, regardless of the censure vote, I'm still Quidditch Captain and you're off the team. I won't tolerate a cheater flying under me now or next year."

I consider what I'll be saying in my owl to Puddlemere's general manager. "Johnson is an above average chaser who flourished mostly because of Wood's play calling, but she shows poor decision making skills that may prove to be a liability on the Pitch. If she is still available in later rounds, you might consider her for a developmental pick, but expect her to spend several years in the Spring Leagues before she has any marketable value." That sounds about right.

Shrugging, I just shake my head, "You're right Angie. I won't fly for you ever again and I hope one day soon you choke on those words." I start towards the stairs.

Lynch interrupts. "Go wait out in the hall, Potter. When we're ready for you, I'll come get you."

"I'll wait up in my room, thank you very much. As for my testimony, I'll make this short. I didn't do it, but if the lot of you think that little of me, I'll be happy to remove the Gryffindor crest from my robes and wear a plain tie for the duration of your little slap on the wrist."

Angelina's voice carries up the stairs behind me, "Cheaters never prosper! That's the new pass phrase Potter!"

I arrive at my room to see that my corner had been thoroughly trashed. It reminds me of when Ginny came looking for the diary. In Slytherin colors the word "Cheater" floated in five different places. "Looks like they got you pretty good there, HJ?"

"So it would seem." I start checking for traps. The curtains, bed sheets, pillow cases all glowed as my wand swept by them. Pretty intricate charms works, but not sophisticated enough to slip by my detection charms. I whip up a little wind and make a mini-tornado circle the floor around my bed. Liquids and powders rise off the stone floor. Sticking solutions and considering the Tripping jinx, probably itching powder. The twins had been busy.

I checked my trunk and found that someone had tried to get in, but couldn't beat my Locking charms. There are times when it was good to be an ex-Marauder, and they are dangerously close to me removing the "ex" from my name.

"Dobby!"

The elf appears. "Yes Master Harry Potter."

I start dispelling the floating words while bringing my employee up to date. "The curtains, bedding, pillows and the headboard are jinxed. I'll disenchant the headboard, but go ahead and vanish the others and replace them. You will need to be extra careful in preparing my food. I want you to avoid all other Gryffindors in addition to the other three houses. Don't let them get close enough to give you any orders and if

you they do manage to give you an order, even if it seems like it will not harm me directly, you are to report that order to myself or Headmaster Dumbledore before you perform it. I need you to avoid all the teachers with the exception of Headmaster Dumbledore as well. Do you understand? There are people in this castle that want to harm me and they will try to trick you to help them.”

“Dobby will not help anyone harm Harry Potter!”

I throw the little bugger a bone. “That’s why Dobby is the best elf in the castle. You keep proving that and I’ll let you be my house elf forever.”

“You keep saying things like that and the blasted creature really is going to start humping your leg, Potter.”

Ten minutes later, I had just finished vanishing the last of the Bubotuber puss from the lid of my trunk. The twins couldn’t get in, so they did the next best thing. I’m drawing my own age line when Ron and Hermione come in. They both looked perturbed.

“I assume the vote didn’t go so well. I guess a change in wardrobe is in order.”

She nods and hands me a copy of the scroll, “The vote was forty-five to fifteen. Lynch and Johnson initially pushed for the rest of the year, but that didn’t get the two thirds vote. They settled for a month with it dropping to a week if you make an apology for entering the tournament. I think that they threw that in because they knew you wouldn’t apologize. The original is on its way to McGonagall right now.”

“It’s about the only thing they’re right about. So, go ahead and ask. You know you want to. Well, what do you guys think? Did I do it?”

Hermione shuffles nervously, “You’ve been so different this year Harry. You’ve been distant and angry, but I don’t think you did this.”

“Ron?”

“What are you doing?”

“I’m cleaning up the mess that your brothers left here. No real humor in these pranks either and as you can see I’m not laughing. Right now, I’m drawing my own age line. If they couldn’t get by Dumbledore’s this’ll keep them out.” I ignore Hermione’s wide-eyes at my admission that I can draw an age line and focus instead on Ron.

“Your own age line! So you did it! I knew it! I didn’t vote to censure you because we’re friends, but I should have known. How’d you do it? I bet it was the cloak wasn’t it!”

“What? Just because I can make an age line proves I did it! You’re an idiot Ron! Hat, you’ve been on my head tonight and seen into my mind. You saw everything that went on in Dumbledore’s office. Did I do it?”

“No. As always, Weasley opens his mouth and only stupidity emanates. He’s clearly the weakest link in your little group.” Despite my own anger, I almost accuse the Hat of deliberately trying to sound like Snape. Now that I think of it, maybe Snape has been imitating the Hat all along?

Ron stood there red faced and open mouthed while Hermione spins and starts for the door. “Oh no, we can call another vote!”

I stop her. “Like a bunch of idiots, they rushed to judgment and had their little vote because some of the sixth and seventh years didn’t get picked and are mad. They ran charging ahead without any facts. Dumbledore’s supposed to say something at breakfast tomorrow.”

“We should at least tell Angelina. She’ll reinstate you.”

“That doesn’t matter right now. She’s made her bed. Let her lie in it. I already have an invite to the Spring Leagues next year. I’m more worried about being stuck in this damn tournament. Someone thinks that putting a fourth year in this tournament is going to get me injured or killed. Like I said downstairs Ron, I’ve got more money and fame than I can stand.”

Ron opens his mouth, "Yeah, poor bloody Harry Potter!" I wonder if the Hat has psychic abilities. Then again, my comment about playing Spring League Quidditch must have caught him off guard.

"Ron! You're not helping!" Hermione tries to play peacemaker. Notice I said "tries".

People say I have a temper. Those people are right. Fine, no kid gloves for you, Ron. "I got it because Voldemort killed my parents. We know he's still out there and trying to come back. Are you that damn thick! You saw the Death Eaters at the World Cup. They're coming out of the cracks and that means they know he's trying to return. Hell, your damned pet turned out to be one of his servants! Your fucking pet helped kill my parents! You don't see me holding that against you! You want a full dose of honesty, how about that Ron!"

Ron looks like I'd just kicked him in the stones. He doesn't debate well and his buttons are easier to push than Malfoy's. Hermione screeches, "Harry! Don't say that!"

"Stay out of this Hermione. Ron's been asking for this for a long time now. I'd been hoping you'd pull your head out of your arse, but apparently you need some help doing it!"

Ron composes his response delivered in a yell. "You've been lashing out at my family all summer! I'm getting sick of it!"

"Oh you mean, by not playing in a prank war with your brothers, or dating your sister." Brandishing the scroll like a wand, I add, "How many people signed this scroll out of fear of what the Twins would do to them otherwise?"

Ron looks like he wants to fight. Right now, I'd oblige him. I was hard on him. Maybe too hard, but all he sees is fame and money. Instead, he does the smartest thing he can do and storms out of the room.

"As for you Hermione, you say I've been distant and angry, well here's why. People keep trying to kill me and I'm getting bloody well sick of it!"

“Harry, calm down!”

“Get out!”

“Harry, we should talk about this.”

“Hermione, what’s there to talk about? It’s just like second year. People are going to believe what they want to, regardless. Ron’s supposed to be one of my best friends and he doesn’t even believe me. Dumbledore will make his announcement saying I did not voluntarily enter the tournament but am bound to compete, but it won’t do a blasted thing! Just leave me alone for awhile. I don’t want to fight. Not with you. I don’t want to argue. I just want to be alone.”

Hermione is upset, more at the situation than at me. Defeated, she leaves. Looking down at the Hat after she’s gone, I say, “They don’t get it, Hat. They don’t see what’s coming and it’s probably going to get both of them killed.”

“Aye. That’s the truth. I feel sorry for the person who did put you in this tournament. You’re going to kill that person aren’t you?”

“You already know the answer.”

Breakfast next morning is a subdued affair. Poppy is less than pleased that I found my way into more trouble. Come to think of it, I’m not too pleased either! She, the Hat, and I go down for the announcement in the Great Hall. Hermione looks like she’s on the verge of tears, and Ron is keeping his distance after my tirade. Good thing, I don’t want to speak with him either. I sit with Neville, who is still trying to apologize for defending me.

“Neville, let it go. You had the best intentions in mind and I appreciate that.”

Having already eaten up in the Infirmary, I don’t bother with any of the food on the table. Dumbledore stands and the meal is cleared away. “May I have your attention please, To quell the rumors concerning what has occurred; we are still investigating how Mr. Potter’s name

came out of the Goblet of Fire. I have determined that Mr. Potter did not enter himself in the Triwizard Tournament. Nonetheless, he is bound to compete as are the three others whose names came out.”

I can feel the eyes upon me. Up and down the Gryffindor table, they are probably starting to realize that they certainly buggered things, so to speak.

“As a result, Durmstrang and Beaubatons have been allowed to add another champion. Miss Athena Manos has been selected to be the second champion from Durmstrang, and Miss Aimee Beaucourt is the second representative from Beauxbatons. Let us wish them all the best of luck.”

Dumbledore yields the podium to the Beauxbatons Headmistress. There’s a round of applause and she starts in with her heavy accent, “The tasks of this tournament are designed to test the mettle of the champions. The rules are a bit of a compromise between the three schools. As is tradition at Beauxbatons, the competitors are allowed an advisor to assist them in developing strategies and for a team competition between the schools. Each school has selected their all-school team and the members have been notified. The Durmstrang rules incorporate additional tasks for our individual champions. Some, like our first task, will be known to the contestants, and others will remain a mystery up until the last moment.”

She pauses, showing that Dumbledore isn’t the only one with a flair for the dramatic. “For our first task, we celebrate our magical heritage with a broom race! As I speak, a course is being created from the castle out into the town of Hogsmeade and back. The sponsor for this event is Gesalt Broom Manufacturers of Marseilles. They will be providing their new Peregrine racing broom to each contestant. None of our contestants have flown this brand new, state of the art broom before now. By tomorrow, I’m told we will have the three additional brooms and the champions will be allowed to familiarize themselves with the Peregrine and the course, the day before the race. I also am pleased to say that Madame Gesalt has generously offered the winning rider the broom that she or he rides to victory!”

I catch the fact that Maxime used “she or he”. Clearly, she is counting on her champions to win. I’m no slouch on a broom and last I checked Krum is a git, but he’s still Krum. I wonder how the Peregrine compares to the Firebolt.

Neville thumps the table. “Wow, Harry! A broom race! Are you excited?”

I can’t deny it. A broom race is pretty cool. “A little, but I’m still trying to figure out who put me into this.”

“Don’t look now, but here comes Lynch.”

“Potter, you can put your tie and robes right.”

“I don’t think so. I read the terms on the scroll. I’m publicly rebuked by my peers for a month, a week if I apologize and I guarantee that I’m not apologizing. You disavow any points gained by me and dispute any points taken from me. Doesn’t that about cover it?”

The tall brunette hisses, “You’re embarrassing Gryffindor!”

“No. You and all the others are embarrassing Gryffindor. Every fifth year and above signed that scroll. I’d have liked to have been there when you delivered the Censure to McGonagall. She ripped you a new one didn’t she?”

Holly looks uncomfortable. “The Professor accepted the Censure, because the charter states that she must. She expressed her opinion that this matter should remain within the tower. In the dorms, wear the black tie. Outside you can continue to display our house colors.”

I’ve got her over a barrel and she knows it. “No. The terms on the scroll clearly state one month or one week if I apologize. You’re only doing this because you the Professor is making you.”

I look to see much of the table is watching the exchange. I see Hale, the seventh year male Prefect, but his Prefect’s badge is noticeably absent. Oh dear, Minerva must have really tore into them. My guess is that Holly is probably hanging by a thread. Speaking of which,

McGonagall is making her way over here. Her gaze bores a hole through the space occupied by Lynch.

“Mr. Potter, I’d like a word before you head off to the wand weighing ceremony. Walk with me.”

Scooping up the Hat I follow the Professor out of the Great Hall. We head towards her office. Once inside, she shuts the door and motions for me to sit. “Potter, I am asking you for a favor. I understand you are quite angry at your forced participation, but do not punish a group of children for acting rashly. Leave that to me.”

“I noticed Hale missing his badge.”

“This was merely the latest in a series of disappointment. His support of this foolishness was as much aimed at myself as it was at you. I stripped him in front of the others as an example. I believe it had the necessary effect.”

I’m guessing Johnson’s worrying about her captaincy next year as well. It’s petty of me, but I want to see her squirm a bit and opt not to play that card just now. “Hat? What do you think?”

“Fuck them! No mercy for the weak or ignorant, Potter. I’m shocked at you, McGonagall. This is a place of learning, and without suffering the consequences of their actions, the useless tits will never learn! Considering the paintings in the Infirmary were asking me about it, everyone in the castle already knows. Face the facts - the cat is already out of the bag. Trying to force it back into the bag will only draw attention to it. Better to ignore it and move on.”

“Vulgar as ever, Hat. I hope you are not letting this artifact unduly influence you, Potter. Had you asked, I would have suggested a different advisor.”

“You should worry more about Potter influencing me. I actually miss the ‘Fire and Brimstone’ McGonagall who first started teaching here over thirty years ago! Always in Dumbledore’s office pushing the envelope. You were a rebel and ready to change the system. Now you couldn’t be part of the establishment any more if you transfigured

yourself into a brick and were mortared into the castle walls. I sense you care more for quotas and class averages than actual student achievement.”

It’s nice to see the Hat has a meaningful relationship with my head of house. What’s amazing is how it adapts its tactics to the person. McGonagall, like Dumbledore would dismiss simple profanity, so it didn’t rely on it, except for shock value. Instead, it hits her hard where she’s prideful with a cold and cutting argument. I steer the conversation towards “safer waters” and wonder if Sinistra might’ve been interested in being my advisor. “Back on topic, I agree with most of what the Hat said about the Censure. We’re better off ignoring it. If the Prophet or one of the other papers ask about it, I’ll say it’s an internal matter and not open for discussion.”

McGonagall sighs and still eyes the Hat with disdain, “Yes, I suppose that is the best path available to us. They will be using the atrium for the press meeting. Your wands will be weighed. I recommend saying as little as possible to Rita Skeeter and it may also be wise to leave the Hat in my office.”

“The Hat will behave. I trust it to know when to hold its tongue.”

“You sound rather certain of yourself, Mr. Potter.”

“As certain as I can be about anything. Hat and I get along just fine. Does the Headmaster have any idea who put my name in the Goblet?”

“I do not believe so. He has not divulged any information to me yet. Should he, I will inform you as soon as practical.”

“Thank you.”

“In that case, I believe our talk is concluded. My door is open to you if you feel the need to talk at any time.” It is a shade of the old McGonagall that JP remembers, but only a shade. I excuse myself and head back towards the Infirmary to see if I can through my Potions lecture with Poppy before I face the Press.

“Hello again, Mr. Potter. It’s been a long time, hasn’t it?” The wandmaker says, knowing full well I saw him a few weeks ago. He is his usual creepy self. He had already been through all the other champions. Sure enough, Delacour confirmed what I already knew by admitting that the Veela hair in her wand belonged to a blood relative.

“Seems like forever, sir. How have you been?” I suppose he could rat me out for bringing Neville to his store, but somehow that level of trouble pales in comparison to the situation I find myself in now.

“I’ve been well. May I have your wand?”

I hand over my wand and he inspects it. Since getting JP’s memories, I’ve spent much more time on the upkeep of my wand, broom and cloak. Magic items don’t grow on trees, do they? Well, I guess technically some grow out of trees, but I digress.

He does a simple spell with it and pronouncing it in fine working order, without going into great detail about its composition. As he hands it back to me, his voice drops to a whisper, “Great and terrible things, Mr. Potter.”

As always, he leaves me wondering exactly what and how much he really knows.

The hounds of the Press are unleashed upon us. It’s open season on us poor school kids. Someone said the Daily Prophet tried to get exclusive access, but La Oracle de Nice and the New Salem Herald nipped that in the bud.

“Rita Skeeter from the Daily Prophet, Mr. Potter, but of course you already know that. Do you have a moment for my readers?”

“Perhaps in a few minutes, I promised my first interview to Miss Clearwater from Teen Witch Weekly.”

The older witch looks furious at the slight. I don’t care. My other memories tell me just what a shrill harpy Skeeter is. She’ll skewer me

regardless. Nevertheless, I push by her and move over towards a much friendlier face.

“Hello, Penny. You’re wearing your hair differently. Going for the mature look?”

She smiles, “Harry, aren’t you the little charmer? I figured I’d try it up these days. You’ve brought the Sorting Hat with you I see, how lovely. I’ll have to make certain to avoid direct quotes from it. Now, what in Merlin’s name is going on here?”

“I wish I knew. Someone entered me in the tournament. All I know is that Dumbledore is investigating.”

“And what’s this I hear about you being Censured?”

“What happened to the innocent little journalist just looking to get her foot in the door?” I ask with a sly smile.

“She has sources here in the Castle.” The Head Boy is a Ravenclaw, so it makes sense.

“My official answer is, it is an internal matter to my house and I choose not to comment.”

“And unofficially?”

“Unofficially, I’m not saying anything in a room full of journalists.”

“Fine, but I’ll want an unofficial answer at some point. So if you didn’t enter yourself, who did?”

“Someone who wants me harmed. People die or get injured in these things. I managed to look up some history last night. One of the tournaments was called ‘The Tournament with No Winners’ where all the competitors died during the second task. Maurice Potter was one of the champions.”

Undeterred, Rita jumps into our conversation, “So, you’re intent on avenging the family name, eh Harry?”

"You'll get your turn, Madame. Until then, my advisor is the Sorting Hat of Hogwarts. You can ask it some background questions." I give her a look of disgust, push the Hat into her hands, and start walking away from Skeeter motioning for Penny to follow.

"Next question. Since you're bound to compete, what are your plans?"

"Do my best. Stick to what I know. Try not to get too fancy."

"With only three years of training under your belt and being raised by Muggles, that's a rather daunting task, especially in the aspects of dueling. Do you feel at a disadvantage?"

"Dueling really isn't on the Hogwarts curriculum. It is included as part of Defense Against the Dark Arts. From what I'm told, there is more emphasis at the other schools, so Cedric is as likely to experience the same difficulties as I will. Like I said, I'll stick to what I know and the rest will sort itself out."

Penny laughs. Over the summer, she'd heard a watered down version of my adventures. "I'm sure you'll be just fine. You have a knack for performing under pressure. Naturally, all my readers will want to know who that special girl on your arm is going to be at the Yule Ball?"

"Depends on how well Ollie treats you?"

She blushes brightly, "Shameless as ever Harry, but much appreciated. Oliver is treating me just fine. So, no, there's no special girl out there for you right now, Harry? You realize that's cover material? I'd heard a rumor that you and Katie Bell had a falling out?"

"I heard that same rumor. Pesky things, those rumors, but I guess you need something substantial to print. How about this? Katie's a very nice girl, but the timing wasn't right. I couldn't give her the attention that she deserves and take the majority of the blame for what transpired. With this hanging over me, I don't see myself actively looking anytime soon. All of my attention is going to be

focused on the tournament, so I'll likely show up with a friend or a casual acquaintance."

I'm guessing that when Katie reads it, there'll be a bit of a knife twist there. I recognized both her and Ginny's name on the Censure scroll. Hell hath no fury, I suppose. Of course, that means I don't have to put up with their apologies, if I choose not to. The odds of me being seen with them at the Yule Ball are slim and none. I'll wait until early December to even worry about that.

Penny nods approvingly and asks, "What about your competition? Any thoughts on the five people you'll be facing?"

"Frankly, I'm more worried about the person that engineered my participation. They're here to compete and win. I'm here to compete, win, and survive."

She gives a tight smile. "That's enough material for me. Now, taking off my reporter's face, you be careful out there, Harry. Oliver and I are both worried about you. If you need help, send an owl."

I thank her and head back to retrieve my Hat as Penny zeroes in on Cedric, who looks somewhat ignored in all the fuss. Krum is basking in his spotlight, but I catch him eyeing the crowd circling me. His eyes narrow, but I can't catch his words. I guess he never got the "plays well with others" comments sent home to his parents. Along the way I stop and speak with a reporter from La Oracle. I have to switch to English a few times, but I give most of my answers in French, which hopefully earns me some points with the foreign media.

Rita approaches and throws the Hat at me. "This thing disgusts me!"

The brim opens wide, "Funny, I was thinking the same thing, Skeeter. You were a distasteful little eleven year old, and I see time hasn't improved you and only made your flesh sag."

"How about I do an expose on how an ancient magical artifact is in dire need of replacement?"

“What? Weren’t you told not to use your wand for that sort of thing, Rita? That’s a good way to get splinters, though I pity that and anything else that might find its way up your skirt.”

Their byplay has caught several people’s attention, so I decide to intervene while the Hat has the advantage. “That’s odd. Normally the Hat is very pleasant to people. Now, I understand you’d like to speak with me.”

Her “clip-on” charm appears faster than a simple conjuration. “Of course, Harry. Naturally, you’ve saved your most important interview for now. Perhaps we could step over here for a bit more privacy?”

“No, here’s good. What questions do you have?”

“So, you’ve got a bit of a reckless streak, Harry? How did you come to enter the tournament?”

“Someone entered me under false pretenses. The Headmaster is investigating.”

“Are you certain this isn’t just an instance of you lashing out at people? I know you suffered under that terrible curse at the World Cup. Are there any lingering effects?”

I keep my answers short. “No to both questions. Next question.”

“I’ve noticed you’re not wearing the Gryffindor emblem or tie and I’ve heard a rumor that you were publicly Censured for entering the tournament. You’re in plain robes and a black tie. What do you have to say about that?”

“It is an internal matter that doesn’t merit discussion.”

“Humor me.”

“Okay. Hat, tell her a joke.”

“There was a witch who walked into a bar…”

“No Harry, what’s the real story behind your bad boy image? It sounds like your housemates have had enough and decided to put you in your place. One could imagine that they’re ashamed of you.”

“Again, an internal matter that doesn’t merit discussion.”

“I think it does.”

“Then I think we’re done here. Good day, Miss Skeeter.”

Her smile is a bit insidious. “No, we’re not done by a long shot, Harry.”

Yeah, I don’t think we are either, but we’ll see what kind of story she writes. I push on to the reporter from the New Salem Herald with a Bulgarian journalist waiting in the wings.

Hedwig is waiting for me with a copy of the Prophet. Teen Witch Weekly won’t be out until Saturday, and the other papers are more concerned with pushing the papers to their readers. Most won’t be here until tomorrow and some would have to be translated after that. Sadly, that gives Rita first crack.

Harry Potter Causes Turmoil at Tournament

By

Rita Skeeter

Hello again, my ravenous readers. The press conference at Hogwarts was, much like anything associated with the doddering old fool Dumbledore, an unmitigated disaster. But it was not the desiccated fossil who was ringmaster of this circus, but the juvenile Harry Potter, trying to foster his teen rebel image.

Yes, my introduction to The Boy Who Lived served only to lower my opinion of our one time savior. Standing there in a room full of adults, not wearing his Gryffindor colors because his own house Censured

him, the teenager did not seem willing to answer any question or make any statement accepting his own responsibility.

I did notice that he made a beeline for Miss Clearwater of Teen Witch Weekly, who he helped catapult to fame with her pandering interview of him months ago. The duo looked rather cozy together making me wonder just what Puddlemere's rising star Oliver Wood might think of the scene. Several sources mentioned that Potter is a bit of a Cassanova at school with his last girlfriend, Katherine Bell, dumping him in a rather public trouncing over another Gryffindor Virginia Weasley.

Now, you know I am no healer, but I have to worry about young Harry's behavior. The Headmaster's insistence that he did not enter this tournament is nothing more than a thin smokescreen to cover Potter's reckless need for attention. Was he too quickly discharged from St. Mungo's after those horrible events around the World Cup? Or is his impulsiveness a sign of a deeper malady. No one else has ever survived the Killing Curse, and even the most learned of researchers can only postulate on what the lasting effects of such a devastating spell could be.

Is this just a case of teenage hormones, or could he pose a threat to the student body? Some of my other sources, who chose to remain anonymous for fear of retribution, commented that he flouts authority at every turn. There was a small matter of his arrival in a previous year in a flying car for those of you that recall the incident. Now Dumbledore is hastily reorganizing the Triwizard Tournament to accommodate the unstable Harry Potter's capricious whims!

However, some people are willing to state what they think of this brash upstart. One of them is Fleur Delacour. The delightful champion and charming witch from Beauxbatons confided to me, "Harry Potter seems to be a very rude and arrogant little boy. Like the people in your country, I had heard tales of him growing up. Apparently, his fame has gone to his head. I want to compete against real wizards and witches. Instead two of my duels will be fought against someone barely in his teens. Where is the sport in that?"

The sizzling Seeker and Bulgarian sensation Viktor Krum carefully chose his words, "Potter is a boy competing in an adult's contest. I only hope the organizers will not be forced to ... What is the expression? Ah yes, 'Water Down' the competition for fear of hurting the child."

Aimee Beaucourt daughter of France's Interior Minister and Athena Manos of the very influential Manos family in Greece are the beneficiaries of Potter's questionable decision. Both of them expressed surprise at being allowed to participate in the contest and neither had anything nice to say about Harry Potter.

Perhaps the only supporter to be found of Potter is the other Hogwarts champion, the likeable and self-effacing Cedric Diggory of Hufflepuff. "Harry said he didn't enter and I believe him. I wish him and all the others the best of luck in the tournament."

I think it's easy to see who the real Hogwarts champion is.

Sources at the Ministry say that Hogwarts has not been very forthcoming with facts. The Minister's Spokeswitch would only say, "Minister Fudge is paying close attention to the events at Hogwarts. While the investigation is in progress, he will continue to monitor the situation closely."

The esteemed Lucius Malfoy, no stranger to Dumbledore's backroom politics, said that if it was proven that Potter caused this mess that the cost of adjusting the tournament should be deducted from the Potter family vaults.

I have no doubt that we've only seen a hint of the intrigue that walks the halls of Hogwarts and wherever news is that's precisely where you will find Rita Skeeter.

I suppose it could have been worse, Draco and several of his Slytherin groupies were waiting in the third floor hallway by the Infirmary.

“Potter! Could I get your autograph on this!”

“Bugger off Malfoy!”

He titters like a schoolgirl and continues in an overly dramatic voice. “Oh, no! I haven’t made you mad at me, have I? I don’t want to do that given what an unstable and violent person you have been.”

Amidst the guffaws of the others I walk by him and see familiar form lurking. I turn at the door to the Infirmary. “Malfoy, fuck you, your father, your mother and your entire bloodline!”

The blond ponce goes for his wand and starts to cast a minor hex. I can easily dodge it, but I don’t have to. A spell from nowhere knocks Malfoy’s wand away and Alastor Moody steps out of the shadows. “I’m not rightly sure what you were thinking there, Malfoy, but there’s no dueling in the halls. I think I’ll be seeing you for a detention on the next Hogsmeade weekend for this. You can also explain to the maggot that runs your house how you just lost twenty points. Now fetch your wand and run along.”

“You heard what he said about my family!”

“No, my hearing’s not so good today, boy, but my vision’s just fine. What I don’t see is you leaving here fast enough, so I think you’ll be serving an extra detention with me. Now get out of here!”

I’d say you didn’t have to tell Malfoy twice, but obviously Moody did. “Interesting little stunt you pulled there. Not a great idea yanking his chain like that when you didn’t have any backup and he had quite a bit.”

“I saw you the whole time and figured you were waiting for a chance to tear into them. I was giving him a sideways profile to make dodging easier. Even if you let it play out, he would have missed and I’d be inside the Infirmary before the rest could draw.”

The ex-Auror nods approvingly. "You're thinking on your feet, lad. Keep it up and you'll do fine in the tournament. If you be needing anything from me, advisor or not, my doors open to you."

"Thank you, Professor. Any clues on who might have entered me in the tournament?"

"Fraid not. The spellwork on the Goblet didn't leave any traces. If it was just dropping your name in the Goblet, I'd be more inclined to say a student, but given the complex hoodwinking going on here, I'd have to say it was someone with some skill and not a snot-nosed brat. Bagman rubs me the wrong way. Igor Karkaroff's as slimy as they come and any day he draws breath is one day too many in my books!"

What can you really say to a statement like that? I nod but keep quiet.

"I might have heard that you have a piece of parchment that might help me keep tabs on people. If you had an item like that, it'd be a great help to me."

"Lupin told you about the Map?" Judas really is his middle name!

"No, nothing of the sort. My information goes back to your father. He and I did a bit of training together and he might've said a thing or two. Rumor is that you have your father's cloak, I figured you might have the map as well."

"I don't have it on me." I stammer.

"When you get it, bring it to me. The sooner I get it, the sooner we can start keeping tabs on the suspects. Bring it by my class at lunchtime."

The one legged man heads off as I head into the Infirmary for my morning chores. I mechanically perform my tasks while searching my memories for JP telling Moody about the map. From what I recall, James was all business with Moody. There weren't that many moments where we kicked back and downed a bottle of firewhiskey while talking about the old times. The Marauders had a code, "What

went on at Hogwarts stayed at Hogwarts.” To my knowledge, he only ever broke that code for Lily.

This troubles me.

Author's Notes - I've been told I write a very convincing Rita Skeeter in the just completed To Fight the Coming Darkness. Given that this story was where she was introduced in canon, I had to dip myself in sleaze and get into her writing style. I find listening to Don Henley's "Dirty Laundry" to be a great help when I want to write as her.

Also, I know what Ginny's first name is. I did this on purpose to underscore how Rita doesn't really check her facts. The mistake is Rita's and not mine. Please don't inundate me with reviews stating that.

Hopefully, this chapter has sucked you back into the storyline (and not simply sucked). I'll be alternating between this one, my original works, and Turn Me Loose for the foreseeable future. Visit Darklordpotter or the FFA forums for discussion of my works.

As a note to you readers on ff dot net, I will be disabling Anonymous reviews on this site. With the esteemed Mr. Newman now leaving Anonymous reviews as JBern (not logged in) and threatening to remove my works from the site, I'd rather remove his venue to do such things. So, for those of you who don't want to log in to leave a review, read and review on fanficauthors. I can simply delete reviews from people who didn't get enough hugs as a child on that site. Jim

Disclaimer – Not mine. I don't own it. All done for fun and entertainment.

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Chapter 9 – Bartering the Truth

“I see you did not need my warning.” The ghostly voice of William Potter interrupts my troubled thoughts. Even amongst a castle full of spirits, the “Bloody Baron” has a certain aura about him that puts one on edge. My thoughts wander as I consider what presence the man had when he lived.

I wave my hand dismissively and make certain that the hospital ward is in order. “Malfoy and his lackeys aren't my problem. They're more like a rash that just won't go away. I thank you for your concern though Lord-Baron.”

The ancient ghost moves up next to me and removes his helmet. There is a passing resemblance between the two of us if you added twenty-five years to my face and the haunted eyes of a cursed man who has walked this earth for nearly a millennium. “Indeed, descendant. The Triwizard Tournament is fraught with peril. I witnessed Maurice Potter's death. The Beauxbaton champion had already perished and all that was left was he and the Russian witch from Durmstrang. She used a simple Confundus charm on the Sphinx demanding an answer when he answered the riddle correctly. The Sphinx flew into a rage and killed both of them. I assume you did not, in fact, enter this contest.”

I gaze out the window waiting for Dobby to arrive with my breakfast. “You're correct. It wasn't me and I'm trying to figure out who is out to get me. It doesn't help that I'm second guessing myself.”

“What vexes thee?”

“How much can I tell you in confidence?”

He shakes his head. "I am bound to answer all inquiries from the Headmaster of Hogwarts, honestly and truthfully, but he is the only one I must answer to."

I was afraid of that. "In that case, I can't say much, at least not now. Someone has asked me for something, but I have no knowledge of telling the person about it."

"Perhaps the memory was removed from you or changed?"

"There is that possibility, but I can't fully say."

"Could the person have learned of this something from someone else?"

Lupin could have told Moody. "Perhaps, though he denied it."

William Potter scratches his spectral chin. "You continue to be vague. So, can you check this person's facts independently?"

"Perhaps"

"Do you need me to recruit some of the other spirits? Your reputation with the living seems to have suffered as of late, but rest assured the dead hold you in high regard, the young maiden Myrtle most of all."

Maybe the Hat is right? If I dated Myrtle, that'd be creepy enough to drive off all these bints.

"I'll take whatever help you can offer and be grateful for it, sir. Karkaroff was once a Death Eater, but he seems to spend most of the time on his ship. Can you get out onto their ship?"

"You are refreshingly mature for your age, Harry. There is a spirit that protects the vessel. It is a most violent and territorial Poltergeist. It would be most difficult, perhaps even a challenge." He finishes with an evil smile. Again, I am reminded that there are things in this castle that fear the Bloody Baron with good reason.

"Not exactly Peeves, eh?"

"It is most definitely not. I have heard that when the ship is moored at Durmstrang, students are often punished by being made to stay overnight and suffer the whims of the Geist."

"That would certainly cut down on the discipline problems. It was just a thought. Don't risk yourself on my account. How about keeping an eye on Professor Moody for me?"

"Aye, it will be done. I will ask the Friar and Nicolas to shadow Karkaroff when he outside of the Geist's protection."

As my ancestor leaves, I head over to the Floo. Technically, I shouldn't be using this without Poppy's approval. As Floos go, it's restricted. It can call anywhere, but only transport to St. Mungo's. I throw some powder and call out Remus Lupin's address and look into his parlor. He walks in wearing robes and carrying a cup of most likely coffee.

Lupin brings mixed emotions to my mind. He was just as responsible as Lily for what happened, during their one time affair shortly before the Potters went into hiding. On the other hand, he helped me last year. "Harry! I surprised to hear from you. How have you been?"

"You haven't been keeping up with the news have you?"

"I stopped reading the Prophet years ago and I prefer Muggle music to the wireless. Is there something I should know?"

"Me first. Did you tell Alastor Moody about the map?"

Lupin shakes his head. "No, I only forwarded him on my lesson plans and notes. Even among wizards Mr. Moody is a bit odd, as you've no doubt discovered."

Rediscovered is more appropriate. "Yes. He's definitely a strange one. Someone entered me in the Triwizard Tournament."

We go through a few minutes of him asking me useless questions and me humoring him by responding. He calls for something and a

small beagle comes in the room. "I call this little fellow 'grim.' Grim is a little underweight, but generally he's in good health whenever I see him. He does have a troubling tendency to wander off, though."

It's how he's telling me about Sirius in the event that his Floo is being monitored. Not a bad idea. I try my best to separate the fact that I'm not James. He didn't sleep with my wife!

I have to cut the connection when I hear Poppy coming back from the morning staff meeting. With no one in the ward, we talk potions for a time, but I can tell that she's bothered. I have a pretty good idea of what's on her mind.

"You're worried about me."

"Of course I am! I thought keeping you close to me this year would stop this foolishness, but now I suspect I'll have more grey in my hair by the end of the year."

"You and me both."

My joke takes the edge off the tension in the room. "I'll spare you any speeches. I'll merely state that I will be most flexible with your work in the Infirmary if you are preparing for a task. Since you will be in my Infirmary, I want you to be here working and not as my patient. Is that understood?"

"Perfectly clear, Madam. The Headmaster recommended that I take you on as my advisor, but I'm sure you're already getting sick of me."

"Nonsense, though I'm perplexed that you chose that awful Hat. I would have recommended someone better suited to teaching you."

I'd refrained from bringing the Hat to Poppy's den since they had a rather terse exchange. "The Hat has nothing but time on it's... hmm, I guess 'hands' is the word. Hat has a unique perspective to help me plan for the tasks."

Her brow knits at the phrase “unique” and we turn back to the Potions lesson. Moody’s request that I turn over the map continues to weigh on my mind.

Because I’m such a sweet talker, I’m able to get out of the Infirmary fifteen minutes early. I make my way to the dorms to retrieve the map.

The twins haven’t tried to test my age line yet, but it’s only a matter of time. They don’t know what their up against and if they did, they’d probably take it as some kind of stupid challenge. James Potter’s strength wasn’t in Potions, but I’ve got two of my six cauldrons that Poppy’s allowed me to set up simmering with something special in case they wander into my sites. There’s an elixir that will grow putrid smelling facial “fungus” that Peter of all people stumbled on during an early experiment, and a nifty bowel loosener that lasts for a full day.

If it escalates, beyond that I’ve got to start brushing up on my Charms and Transfiguration. They rely on people ingesting their products. Some items can be charmed or permanently enchanted to do similar things. James replaced Lupin’s belt once with one enchanted to have a babbling jinx on it. Because it looked like someone hit him with the spell, he kept removing it. Fifteen minutes later, he’d start babbling again just like clockwork.

The prank went over so well that they did it to Snape. There was a notable exception that instead of a belt, James started with a snake and Transfigured it into a belt. When the Halfblood Prince disenchanting it, he had a nice three foot long constrictor wrapped around his waist.

Yeah, Jimmy boy had a bit of a nasty streak, but a pair of babbling belts for the twins might be in order. Maybe I could rework the enchantment to link the belts together moving the jinx from one belt to the next so that when it’s cancelled on one, it immediately moves to the other.

Either that, or it’s going to be the return of the “Shit Spiders.” Take a piece of manure, transfigure it into a spider, drop a compulsion on it

and send it up the walls to their dorm and have it crawl onto their pillow and wait until the effect wears off and it reverts to normal. I go with the dry stuff for the everyday chuckle. The wet stuff gets used when you want to make a point.

“How is the irritating bitch?”

“Madame Pomfrey misses you as well Hat. Everything nice and quiet?” I cross my age line focusing on my Occlumency. The Hat sits on a little shelf I created up in the canopy it can remain unseen.

“Yes. Though one of the Weasley twins paced the edge of your age line and ran some basic diagnostics against it.”

“That figures. I guess I’ll have to send a warning shot across their bow. Shit spiders for two are on the menu tonight. I’ll have to swing by Hagrid’s and see what kind of base material he has on hand, but now I’ve got more pressing issues.”

“Such as?”

“Moody knows about my map and wants to use it.”

“Considering, you were trying to convince me to watch it, I don’t see a problem.”

Withdrawing my key from my pocket, I open my trunk and remove the Marauder’s Map. Moody is in his classroom, along with the seventh years, and Barty Crouch. It’s a bit odd that Crouch looks like he’s doing the teaching with Moody sitting off to the side. They’ve been spending a good deal of time together from what I could recollect.

“My problem is that he claims James told him about it and I don’t have any memory of it. Think there’re any more memories up in the old noggin that we missed?”

“Perhaps, but I think we got everything.”

“Do you want to come?”

“No, I like being here and watching your wares like some kind of guard-newt. Of course I want to go along, you dripping mass of anal seepage!”

That’s one I hadn’t heard before. I should be honored; the Hat is trying to impress me. I scoop it along with the map, while heading out the dorm and place it over my brow. “So, great and powerful advisor, do you have a foolproof strategy for my broom race this weekend?”

“Fly faster than the other five twats.”

“You are a master of the obvious.”

“That makes one of us HJ. The obvious has a way of eluding you all the time.”

“Touché,” I add wondering if Delacour might sleep close enough for one of my fecal arachnids to reach her. “I meant any real advice.”

“Oh, real advice. The course will be tight and you won’t be able to simply rely on speed. Everyone will use their size to their advantage. For Diggory and Krum, they’re bigger than you and will try to bump you to force you to miss one of the floating course markers. The females will use their lighter weight to try and out accelerate you, reaching top speed faster. Use bullying tactics against the females and try to out maneuver the males.”

“Makes me wonder why the sponsor is a French Broom company? Seems kind of foolish with Krum in the competition.”

“Unless of course Beaucourt and Delacour race on the European broom circuit you nitwit. Both are ranked in the top fifty, Delacour in the top fifteen. Perhaps you should actually try and learn about your opponents.”

“How did you pick that up?” Broom racing isn’t that popular in England. A few racing teams exist, but England only hosts a handful of races each season.

“I saw the names in a magazine article at Wood’s apartment.”

“And when were you planning on telling me this?”

“Right before the race started and getting the elf to take my bet on the Delacour witch.”

I send the mental image off a shrunken Hat with Dobby using it as a condom. Then I make a note to stop by the library and look through the periodicals section to learn about the French witches as we head past the students just now leaving class.

The Defense Against the Dark Arts room is empty except for Moody and Crouch standing by the desk in conversation as I walk in.

“Good to see you Potter.” Moody says with his back to me using his creepy eye. Looking over at Crouch he says, “Could you give us a minute? Potter and I have a small matter to discuss.”

Crouch nods slowly and heads into Moody’s office adjacent to the room as the old Auror turns to face you. “Did you bring it lad?”

“Yes. Could I ask you how well you knew my father?”

Moody cackles, “Let’s just say, I gave him a few tips in the old days and leave it at that. Maybe, I can assign you a detention or two and I can show you a few of the more useful ones.”

I pull the map from the inside pocket of my robes. “Did my father tell you how to activate it?”

“Does, ‘I solemnly swear that I’m up to no good’ ring any bells?”

“It does.” I hand it to him.

“Thanks. I can keep an eye on everyone’s movements now. It’ll make my job that much easier. Run along now and get some lunch, lad. I’ve got business with the man in my office.”

This seems wrong on several levels. I can't recall James ever telling him about it. Lupin didn't and Sirius couldn't have.

I don't know if it's me or the Hat on my head that thinks it first – Peter?

Moody stops. "Is there a problem, Potter?"

"Well, it's just that I heard my Dad was real keen on becoming an Auror. I just wanted to know if he talked about it with you?"

"That he did, lad and he would've made a damn fine one too."

"He's lying, Hat. James didn't want anything to do with the Ministry. He and Moody used to have a good laugh about all the paperwork and regulations surrounding it."

"The question is why is he lying?"

"Let's test him."

"Mr. Lupin told me about a group last year called the Order of the Phoenix that helped the Headmaster oppose Voldemort. He said you were in it along with my parents."

Moody flinched! Alastor Moody would never utter Riddle's false name, but he never flinched at it!

"You heard right, but that's not a conversation for here. Some other time, Potter, now off with you."

"He's trying to get rid of me Hat."

"I know, but he said that there was a funny story I should remind you about if I got the chance. Something about you and a man named Benjy Fenwick fighting over dating Amelia Bones. He said it was hilarious and I should get you to tell it."

Moody looks angry for a second, but the laughs, "I'd forgotten about that! Yeah, those were the good times. Some other time, Potter."

I'm already drawing my wand. "Except I just made that up. The real Alastor Moody introduced the two of them and was supposed to be Benjy's best man. Who are you? Accio map!"

As I summon the map, Moody dives behind the desk. I'm already diving to my left when my hand closes over the parchment.

His return fire goes over my head, a yellow burst of energy that I don't recognize. He rolls out from behind the furnishing. Another salvo from his wand seals the door causing the wall above the door to melt down and cover the way. James Potter had seen that spell before. Death Eaters used it all the time to prevent their prey from escaping. That's a pretty good indicator of who I'm facing.

"Let's see what the boy hero can really do." He hisses.

I point at the candle holder near him and Transfigure it into a claw that leaps at him. His blast disintegrates it and he Banishes several desks and chairs at me. I counter with a wide area spell, part Banisher, part Shield, and definitely not on the Hogwarts curriculum. "Fluctuosus Armaorum!"

Some call it the Wave of Power. My dueling manuals call it the Wave Block. Either way, it's a three -foot wide expanding swath of power Banishing everything in its path. The desks reverse their course and take chairs and other tables with it, tossing the false Moody into the wall and smashing a chair into him. The energy flattens against the wall and runs through the room dissipating. Wasteful as hell, but in a cluttered environment like a classroom full of debris, it's dead useful.

His painful shriek tells me that I did some damage. Crouch comes sprinting out the door at me looking wild eyed and possessed. I Stun him; rather, I try to Stun him. His clothes have a reflective ward on them and I barely leap out of the way of my own spell coming back at me. I side step his leap and send a second Stunner at his unclothed head that drops him. I Conjure ropes to be sure he's bound, but am forced to dive out of the way of a series of chairs and a desk being hurled at me.

A high-pitched scream, "You shall not harm Master Barty!" There's a female little house elf between me and the fake Moody." Holy shit! Now I know how Lucius must have felt. The dratted thing is insane! I Transfigure a claw out of some debris to capture her, but it pops away from it. Where'd it go?

"The Dragon! Potter! Look out!"

The skeleton hanging above the classroom, technically a wyvern, comes to life as its tail slings around just missing me and smashing into the bookcase. The elf is perched on the head waving her tiny hands and controlling the spiked tail. I roll out of the way as that jagged bone shatters a pair of desks like an axe swing from Hagrid. My Severing charm cuts through the bone. Hurry! Fake Moody's getting back up!

"Stop him, Winky!" The imposter lashes out as I send a Bonebreaker in his direction.

The elf looks makes the wyvern's mouth snap at me, but her energy is fading fast and the skeleton's mouth doesn't move that quickly. Those little buggers have limits and she's way past hers. The Death Eater sends a blast of hail my way forcing me to Conjure a solid shield.

The elf with what little magic is left in her, pops in the air right in front of me and grabs onto my face. My glasses and the Hat go flying. The tiny fist pulling my hair I can ignore, but her finger gouging my right eye, I can't.

"Motherfucker!" I scream ripping the elf away with my free hand and smash her against the wall. Her master's piercing curse rips through my hand and the elf in it. The elf falls to the ground, because I can't hold her anymore. Getting my solid shield back in front of me, I cradle my ruined hand against my stomach. Blood seeps out of a galleon sized hole and my fingers dangle uselessly with the bones connecting them to my wrist destroyed.

My opponent tries some Transfiguration of his own as a chair next to me changes shape into a dog. A Slicer bisects it, but costs me my shield as the Death Eater demolishes it.

Without my glasses and with one eye injured, I can't tell how badly the imposter is hurt, but he can't be much better off than I am. He starts Conjuring smoke, further obscuring my view. If that's really Moody's eye, it won't affect him at all!

But James dueled against the "real" Moody enough to know that the eye has a weakness or two. The current owner might not be aware of them. I Conjure some serious fireworks in this confined space. The flash of colors should momentarily overwhelm the artifact. The real Moody practiced against this tactic all the time. I can't hear over the thunderous detonations. Now both of us are half blind and mostly deaf. I've got maybe thirty seconds before he can effectively use the eye again.

Staying low, my wand works quickly and the desk next to me ripples under my influence. Frantic darts of energy lash out from my enemy. This Transfiguration was good enough to impress JP's NEWT examiner. It should be more than adequate now. The legs of the desk morph and blur into bestial legs. The top bunches together and spawns fur and a head. Even in my semi-deafened state, I hear a roar. After all what Gryffindor worth his salt wouldn't strive to create his very own lion?

"Go get him!" I move counterclockwise knowing my opponent didn't look that mobile.

My lion must take a hit or two, but pounces and starts mauling him. I charge through the smoke and command the lion to stop and pin him. The Death Eater is in really bad shape with a bite wound on his shoulder and blood soaking through his robes. He tries to raise his wand, but my spell violently disarms him. The spell snaps his arm, causing a satisfying howl of pain.

"Who are you?" The lion moves off of him and with a wave of my wand and it returns to its base form.

His head lolls to one side and he coughs. "Your time is coming, Potter. The Master will have his revenge!"

It wasn't helping me determine who he is. I could try the map, but first I'd need to locate the dratted thing. "Dumbledore will figure out who you are..."

In response, he cackles, "Oh yes, summon the senile bastard. I want him to know how I fooled him for months!"

"Where is Voldemort?" I jam my wand into his neck.

He spits at me and grimaces. "Closer than you ... think. You can't escape him and you'll get nothing from me!"

"I know someone you can't fool. Accio Sorting Hat!"

The man looks scared for a moment, but then laughs and says a nonsensical word. There's a sharp crack. Bloody foam starts coming out of his mouth. Some kind of charmed false tooth releasing a poison! I shove the Hat on his head.

"Hat, he's poisoned himself. Pull what you can out of him! Rape his mind if you have to!"

Seconds later the brim opens up. "Ah, Barty Crouch, Junior, we meet again. So Black wasn't the first to escape Azkaban, was he?"

The name fills me with blinding rage. One of Frank and Alice's torturers right here in front of me for all this time. I cast a Vomiting curse on him and kick him. It might keep him alive for a minute or two longer and I fish a Bezoar out of my pocket. He tries to keep his mouth shut, so I send another kick into his gut. That gets it open.

"He's fighting me with Occlumency!" The Hat growls as I immobilize him.

"You're not getting away that easily, Barty! Don't die on us yet, you fucking maggot! Frank and Alice deserve some payback! I want to know who you are working with! I want the names, Barty! Give me the

names! Is it Lucius? Is it the Yaxley's? Where is Voldemort? Tell me." I pepper him with questions hoping the answers seep through the dying man's mental defenses. Moody's eye continues to whirl wildly in the socket for a minute more and then stops.

About thirty seconds goes by. "Don't just stand there. Get me off of this corpse's head and wipe the blood off of me before it stains!"

A conjured bandage covers my shattered and bloody hand. Bone regrowth and flesh stretching - damn if that isn't going to hurt! Still, I've survived worse, in this and other lifetimes.

My voice is raspy from the smoke. My wand work is clearing it, but not nearly fast enough. "How much did you get?"

"Some. Not enough. That's the real Alastor Moody over there on the ground, under an Imperius and the Mindslave potion. Crouch Senior is under the influence as well."

The room is thoroughly trashed and I can see house elves popping in already. I order one to immediately go to Poppy and alert her that both Moody and I are injured. I send the next elf to Dumbledore to let him know that there's a dead Death Eater in the classroom.

The elves don't hesitate like they normally do when a student tries to order them about. They know that an angry Harry James Potter is not something to be ignored. One of them hands me my glasses as the Hat disclosed the one thing that could possibly infuriate me more.

"I saw Pettigrew as well."

My teeth gnash down against the thick Muggle mouthpiece as another spasm of pain passes through me. Flesh stretching is only slightly less painful than bone regrowth. Poppy's already vanished the bones in my left hand and is now meticulously forcing my flesh and muscle to grow back together.

Only my head and right arm are able to move as she has me in a partial Paralysis spell.

“Are you certain you don’t want to be Stunned for this, Harry?” She doesn’t use the customary “Mr. Potter.” She’s getting all soft on me.

I fumble and remove the mouthpiece. “No, I need to listen in.”

By listening in, I meant to the group of people assembled here in the infirmary. I gave Dumbledore the brief short story in the wrecked classroom while the real Moody was taken by Phoenix to the Infirmary. Instead of cancelling the curse on the doorway, Dumbledore opts to leave it intact until the elves finish repairing the classroom.

Once up in the Infirmary, Poppy reads me the riot act about my injuries and then starts working on me. In fairness, only a few hours had passed since she told me that she didn’t want me as a patient, but she stopped when Fawkes brought in Crouch Junior’s body. If ever there was a time to say, “but you should see the other guy” that was it, but I was already in enough pain.

Within thirty minutes, we were joined by Amelia Bones and Kingsley Shacklebolt “escorting” a disheveled looking Barty Crouch, Senior. Fudge and a bodyguard showed up mere moments after that. The four heads of house also joined in for a jolly good time. Just a few more and we could Conjure a Quaffle for a quick game of indoor Quidditch; provided, of course, whichever team picked me didn’t expect me to score that much.

Crouch Senior has a meandering tale to tell, sobbing over his son’s body often calling the corpse “Master” and “Son” in the same sentence. His wife apparently took Junior’s place in Azkaban and was buried on that filthy rock. Sometime right before the end of the last school year, there was a reshuffling in the Crouch household as Junior got the better of Senior with that dead elf’s help. I commit this to memory for the next time Hermione gets on her “Free the Elves” crusade.

Were I not in so much pain, I could empathize with Fudge. Things don't look so hot in the wake of the Death Eaters at the World Cup and now this.

The first time someone mentions the name Sirius Black in conjunction with all of this, I spit the mouthpiece out with a tone of disgust. "Maybe you didn't quite understand it when the Hat said he saw Peter Pettigrew in Crouch Junior's mind."

Amelia Bones bristles. I'd expected it to be Fudge, but today has been rather full of surprises. "Mr. Potter, the Sorting Hat's also stated that the perpetrator was using Occlumency to protect his mind. He could also have been using false images. I know you are not familiar with this branch of magic, but believe me when I tell you that is why Pensieve images are not permitted in our courts."

I fight the urge to tell her that I know a good deal more than she thinks about what can and can't be done with the Mental Arts. "Granted, images can be manipulated. However, I have seen Pettigrew with my own eyes, as has Hermione Granger and Ron Weasley. Nobody would believe any of us last year because we were just teenagers. I'm still a teenager, but I've killed two Death Eaters in just slightly over two months. How many more will it take for you to start taking me seriously?"

At least three people that I can tell try to cram those words right down my throat. I stick with Madame Bones because she's the one most likely to see reason. Raising my voice above theirs, "... and furthermore, if you'll recall the inquest, this imposter was the first one in to see Crabbe, meaning there's the person that Obliviated him. Right there! When you have two people by definition you have a conspiracy!"

Dumbledore steps between the two of us holding his hands up and trying to quiet things. I spot him casting a Silencing charm at the doorway. "Indeed, Harry does have a compelling argument and the wounds to back his concerns. Truly, none of us can deny that there is a surge in Dark activity. Cornelius, I have cautioned you that Lord Voldemort seeks to return previously. Even though it is not politically

expedient for you to acknowledge that fact, we must face the reality that his former minions are reconstituting.”

Fudge shakes his head, “Following Sirius Black’s escape. If anything they are rallying to his side. Things are already ugly enough without alarming the public with stories about He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Name’s return. We need to concentrate on real threats like Sirius Black.”

Dumbledore sends me a look to cut off my reply. “I too am now convinced of Mr. Black’s innocence.”

“Albus! You take a dangerous position. Black confessed! You yourself identified him as the Potter’s secret keeper. What more do you need?”

My turn, “If he was such a threat why didn’t he fight the Aurors after Peter staged his death. Surely if he was a high ranking member of Voldemort’s inner circle, he could handle a handful of Aurors. Snape over there wasn’t very high in the pecking order, but I’m sure he could have easily taken down two or three.”

“Potter!”

It’s a nice jab and a reminder that Snape still carries the Mark. “In all your spying for our side did you ever encounter Sirius Black?”

“The Death Eaters wore masks Potter, perhaps if you thought for a moment...”

“Severus, that is enough. Harry had a rather close encounter with a Death Eater recently and is in a great deal of pain from his injuries. He also feels very passionately about his Godfather’s innocence. Now, the question before us is how do we proceed?”

People start talking, but an all too familiar shriek interrupts. “Master Harry Potter is safe! Dobby is being so worried!” My mostly immobile body reels under the impact of the elf.

“The other elves tell Dobby that Mr. Harry Potter is injured. Dobby is so glad. Tickry bring Harry Potter’s map to Dobby and now Dobby return it to Harry Potter.”

Oh shit! Thank you very much Dobby! Everyone is looking at the slightly damaged looking piece of parchment in the elf’s smallish hands. Even worse, it’s still active. Dumbledore’s eyebrow arches in surprise. “Dobby, if you would give that to me. Mr. Potter is receiving medical attention. I will hold it for him until then and you are dismissed.”

Amelia Bones and Minerva both ask, “What is this map, Albus?”

“It is a rather ingenious creation of some rather impressive students from yesteryear.”

How did Dumbledore know about the Marauder’s Map? Either Lupin told him or, no, it couldn’t be! Lupin said he had help with the Runes when it was made, but never gave up the name of his assistant. James had always assumed that it was the Ancient Runes Professor at the time, but apparently it went much higher than that!

Flitwick looks from his low vantage point and leans in, “Why those are the names of people moving about in this castle! What a magnificent item!” Actually, what’s remarkable is how easily distracted everyone is from this conspiracy by a “shiny toy.” James Potter probably would have never noticed this, but Harry James Potter sees the Wizarding world from a slightly different point of view.

He flips through the folds while casually commenting, “Yes, I would be most curious to learn how this came into Harry’s possession. Truly a remarkable piece of ...”

Dumbledore trails off while looking down at the map. His eyes snap up and he looks over in my direction. He’s not looking at me, but I can see his eyes darting back and forth with absolutely no twinkle in them. His eyes settle on the nightstand next to my bed and his wand is out in a flash creating a bubble encasing the piece of furniture.

Inside the bubble is a tiny beetle, furiously bouncing off the sides of the enclosure as it tries to fly through the barrier. "How lovely of you to join us, Ms. Skeeter."

Several minutes later, back in her human form Rita looks rather nervous. I suppose it's not everyday that you get caught being an illegal Animagus in front of the Supreme Mugwump, the Minister of Magic, the Director of Magical Law Enforcement, a pair of Aurors, the senior staff of Hogwarts including Poppy, and naturally 'The Boy Who Lived.'

Am I concerned about being an illegal Animagus? Not really. I don't have to worry about it until I'm an "adult" or have at least one O.W.L. The law on registration was written under the assumption that no one could ever achieve this before their fifth year. James Potter achieved it before he had even set foot in Hogwarts, but he owed much of that to his private tutor from age five, Gabriella Pomeroy. In addition to teaching him French, Latin, etiquette, and basic household magic, she was quite a feisty little mink Animagus. Her lessons and teaching style allowed James to enter the school with so much prior knowledge that his first three years were mostly review.

In hindsight, that is probably why JP was quite the little troublemaker, but reflecting on another lifetime isn't important right now.

"When my readers here about this attempted cover up, Minister, you'll be lucky if they don't run you out of the country."

Amelia Bones, a longtime victim of Skeeter's skewerings simply smiles, "It will be hard to post your stories from Azkaban."

"You wouldn't dare!"

"You have an unregistered talent and have been clearly using it to spy on closed door matters. Shackbolt, Scrimgeour, please take Ms. Skeeter into custody." Bones stops and adds, "With your permission of course, Minister."

Fudge shakes his head slightly, "Amelia, let us not act rashly. I'm certain that we can reach some sense of a consensus. Rita certainly

isn't going to write an article that would incite a public riot and we're certainly not going to lock her in the lowest levels of Azkaban with a Dementor stationed at her door twelve hours a day. We're reasonable people here."

The smell in the air isn't coming from Crouch Junior's corpse. It's the smell of dirty politics.

Deals are struck and concessions are made as the "official" story begins to take shape. In this story, an unidentified Death Eater attempted to subvert Barty Crouch the Elder for the purpose of an assassination attempt on the life of one Harry James Potter. The Death Eater was killed during the fracas and I, Moody, and Barty Crouch Senior were injured during the fight. Alastor Moody was credited with the kill. The Ministry will be on the lookout for an unnamed accomplice of a particular description, who is rumored to be a rat Animagus. This refocus on security means that Ministry assets outside of the country searching for Sirius Black will be needed back in England. The "administer the dementor's Kiss on sight" order will be lifted, so that Mr. Black can be fully questioned.

Ms. Skeeter will report this "exclusive" story in tomorrow's paper and I will need to give her several quotes about my harrowing ordeal, which will probably be the closest semblance of truth in the whole article. In private documents she will register as an Animagus, pay a fine, and agree to a two year suspended sentence provided the details of this day's events remain unchanged. She will also retract a series of rather humiliating stories that apparently highlighted Amelia Bones' widely rumored and mostly scandalous social life

Minister Fudge and I, perhaps even with Albus Dumbledore in the background, will appear in a lovely photograph for the story showing the smiling and caring Minister at my hospital bedside as soon as Rita's photographer can be brought in and at least one of my quotes will be praising the job the Minister has done. The Minister will issue a statement confirming that this unnamed Death Eater was responsible for my entry into the Triwizard Tournament and will call for the Wizengamot to increase the funding for the Department of Magical

Law Enforcement in response to the increased level of Dark activity. Additionally, in light of both recent and past actions, the Minister plans to put my name in for an Order of Merlin, Third Class, which he will present to me at the Yule Ball.

I actually fought against that, but Fudge wants to milk publicity out of me like I'm some sort of dairy cow, and in the end it's better than looking at another picture of him rubbing shoulders with Lucius Malfoy.

Behind the scenes, Amelia Bones will be starting an inquest into the Sirius Black case which within six months will yield her recommendation that should Mr. Black be recaptured that he be brought to trial in lieu of the one that he had never had. Any blame on this matter will be directed at the Bagnold administration and of course Barty Crouch Senior, who will be taking a medical retirement to recover from his ordeal. When he finally regains his wits, he'll have to live with the knowledge that anytime Fudge might need a major distraction for the public, the identity of the Death Eater can be confirmed, and he'll be served up as a big old scapegoat.

A routine clerical review of Aurors Scrimgeour, Shackbolt, and Dawlish's records will discover that all three of them have been shorted a full month worth of vacation. This oversight will promptly be corrected.

Coincidentally, several of Hogwarts departments will be benefitting from donations from Fudge's personal coffers, part of the Minister's brand new "Commitment to Excellence in Our Educational System Initiative" in the core subjects of Potions, Charms, Transfiguration, and Herbology. The hospital ward will also be upgraded to give world class care to the "Future of Magical Britain!"

At the next meeting of the ICW, Albus Dumbledore will read a statement from Minister Fudge that expresses concern at the surge in Dark Activity and a call for vigilance on all the members of this esteemed body.

Finally, the Sorting Hat of Hogwarts two hundred and fifty year sentence for it's part in a student's death has been commuted based

on it's – ahem “good behavior.” However, it will not be receiving a bath and cleaning by a trio of naked Veela. If it truly wishes that, it must find a way to pay for its trip to the famed Veela Spa in Tuscany and any associated treatment upon arriving at the Spa.

After the vows of secrecy have been sworn with Albus “Mr. Greater Good” Dumbledore serving as Oathmaster and Binder, the room begins to clear. The Hat now rests on my head as most of the people have left. Fudge was one of the last with our photograph and the reminder that the Potter vaults are nearly as full as the Malfoy vaults with none of the attached stigma, and that I'll be of age before the next election.

For what it's worth, the Hat is doing a decent job of keeping my mind off the pain of bone regrowth. Even so, the newly formed bones will be weak and still growing for the next seven days. I may not even be able to hold the broom right during the broom race. That might hamper me a bit, but I can manage.

“Personally, I thought it was a most reasonable request, Hat. Never thought I'd see the truth so completely... I guess 'bartered' is the best word for it.”

“We need to discuss payment for my advisory services, HJ - five hundred galleons and a trip to Italy.”

“How did I not see that coming?”

“You win this thing and get the full thousand you can even have them scrub down your malnourished, scrawny flesh.”

“How about Milly Bulstrode in Myrtle's bathroom with a scrub brush and a bucket of hot soapy water?”

“Only if she's naked and you are having intercourse with her.”

“That's low, Hat.”

"If I was trying to be 'low,' I'd give you the mental image to go along with it, you little shit. As it is, I'm in a good mood. Freedom agrees with me."

"That's because Freedom hasn't had to see you in two centuries. Give it a day or two."

"Excuse me Harry," Dumbledore interrupts, "I see that you and the Hat are deep in conversation, but I thought I would interrupt and ask for a moment of your time."

"What can I do for you, sir?" I keep my tone neutral.

"Among other things, I'm curious where you came across this map?"

If I were a vindictive person, I could finger the twins, but I'll take care of them on my own. "Something I picked up along the way."

His expression loses a bit of twinkle, "There is also the matter of the injuries to young Barty. Even had he not ingested the poison, I suspect that he would not have survived much longer. I must ask you, how you managed to dispose of him? Minerva has expressed a concern about your skills in Transfiguration."

The old Harry would have crumbled. The Defense classroom was pretty much destroyed. I can't exactly blame all the carnage on the other three. "I guess a bit of a confession is in order. When I fought against the Dementors, it felt like something was uncorked and my magic has been more powerful ever since. It's like a power I never knew existed."

In every great lie, there is a kernel of truth. This could actually be the power referenced in the prophecy. Since he doesn't know that I know and most likely isn't about to confess what he's been hiding from me, it should give him enough pause. Instead of power, I have knowledge, and with that knowledge I can use my power.

Dumbledore looks thoughtful, "A traumatic event can often bring out the best in a wizard or a witch. You've had more than your fair share

of those. If it's not too much of a bother, would you mind demonstrating for me?"

I concentrate on the image in my mind and utter the words. The bed next to mine reforms itself into another lion. I keep it still while the he paces around it giving it a critical assessment. "Fine work, Harry. The definition is a bit off on the hind legs and tail, but it is an admirable Transfiguration, exceeding even your father's vaunted skills. I gather your time spent with Mr. Wood this summer has been quite productive? There seems to be a bit more to your request at the beginning of the summer to borrow our Sorting Hat?"

"Guilty as charged, sir. I needed someone's advice on how to handle all this. The Hat was most useful, and when I wasn't talking with it, I was reading all of Oliver's books. One thing the Hat was very keen on is the study habits of previous headmasters. Despite the Hat's personality, it is a brilliant observer of how people organize their thoughts."

All through this, his normal more jovial look returned, "Now your decision to retain the Hat as an advisor for the tournament becomes less dubious. When this contest is over and I can again freely help you, my door is ever open to you. If I am occupied, I am certain either Professors McGonagall or Flitwick would avail themselves to you."

"I'll be certain to take you up on it, sir."

"Again, I am grateful to you, Harry. Once more, you have proven up to the challenges that Darkness has thrown in your path. Most stare blindly into the light, ignoring the shadows and what darkness may lurk in them. That said, you should not close yourself off from your friends and housemates. I understand there has been a spot of trouble between you and the rest of Godric's house?"

"It's trivial compared to this afternoon."

He places his hand on my still immobilized shoulder and gives a gentle squeeze. "Indeed, but no doubt several of them will reach out to you, my boy, and express their regret. Do not judge them too

harshly is all I ask. Look for the goodness in all and your world will be a better place.”

“I’ll try sir. If possible, I would like you to bring someone else in on the identity of the Death Eater?”

“Mr. Weasley or Miss Granger?”

“Actually, Neville Longbottom, sir.”

“Neville? Why would ... oh, of course, dear Frank and Alice. I will ponder the pros and cons of this. The truth could ease his burden or it could reopen old wounds, but there is much honor in your request. I will give it my utmost consideration before rendering a decision.”

In my mind, the Hat comments, “He couldn’t love the sound of his voice more if he could Transfigure it into a pussy ... or maybe a prick – there’s always been a rumor or two about Albus Dumbledore.”

All I can manage during this is a mumbled, “Thank you, sir.”

“Now onto more pressing business, after your release from the Infirmary, please come to my office at six o’clock tomorrow evening. Do bring your cloak as the weather is turning a bit chilly. No doubt, you’re anxious to test your mended hand, so I would anticipate the need for your wonderful broom as well.”

I sense something afoot, but play the stupid teenager. “Where are we going?”

“Well, I figured it’s been far too long since I enjoyed a simple broom flight myself and thought that you might make a suitable flying companion. It will have to be a rather short flight I’m afraid, my presence is required in France early tomorrow. My dear friend Nicholas has finally released his grip on the mortal coil, and his widow grieves for him as her time approaches. I thought I would attempt to cheer her and make her final days on this earth more bearable by bringing her a pet dog that I’ve seen in the area. The Forbidden Forest here in England is not suited for this particular

canine and I think his disposition and prospects might improve at a lovely chateau in the French countryside.”

He’s wasting no time getting Sirius out of the country. “Oh, I see. I’ll be happy to accompany you. I need to shake off the rust for the race.”

“Of course, I look forward to our journey together. Now, I must go and determine how to fill my void at Defense Professor. Once again the fabled curse that hounds that position has struck. I’m afraid Alastor was in very bad shape after enduring months of torture. He will need several months to recuperate both physically and mentally.”

“May I have the map back?”

“In good time, Harry. With so many additional people in the castle for the tournament, I may be able to make better use of it. Rest assured that I will take excellent care of this prized relic.”

It’s a losing battle. I know enough to roughly recreate it. It’ll be a challenge. I grimace as the bones begin to press against the newly crafted flesh giving me a double dose of pain. Dumbledore takes this as his cue to leave and wishes me a restful evening.

The next day is a bother. After being cleared to leave the Infirmary and listening to the song and dance of what “supposedly” happened. Scanning the Great Hall, I see many people staring at me. The rumor mill must have been churning out some really great ones. Cedric gives me a nod and a brief smile.

I show Hermione the front and back of my left hand and the two new scars added to my collection. She seems upset at missing one of my “adventures,” but this wasn’t your average encounter with a troll in the old water closet either. Two people are hospitalized for the long term and the other is dead.

“I can tell there’s more to it than what you are telling me.” She continues to wheedle dragging me towards our next class.

I pull her into a nearby broom closet and lie my arse off. I doubt I would tell her even without the vow. She deserves the truth, just not today. "Hermione, I'd tell you if I could, but do you know what a Vow of Silence is?"

"Of course Harry, it's when a person has sworn a binding vow not to speak of ... Oh, that's why you aren't... forgive me Harry. I'm pestering you and you literally can't talk about what happened. I'm just glad you're safe!" She throws her arm around me for another hug.

Whispering in her ear, I have a bit of fun, "You realize that if someone opened the door they'd find us in here in a rather compromising position."

She squeals and jumps back, knocking over several items and creating a ruckus. I get a good laugh, "Good show, Hermione, now most everyone on the floor knows that someone is in this closet!"

"Quit laughing at me!"

"Oh, alright." We wave our wands and right things. Despite the pain in my hand, I'm in a good mood. I know who was trying to kill me and that person won't bother me again. Sirius will be safe in France by this evening and Dumbledore isn't poking into my business too much.

Smiling, I continue, "So should we disillusion ourselves and try to sneak out, or do we just walk out and see who's around?"

"You're such a prat."

"Unless, of course, you want to snog for a few minutes and give them something to talk about?"

"Harry Potter! I can't believe you'd even suggest that!" Well, now anyone actually in the hallway should have a good idea of who is in here. She throws the door open and rushes out with her knickers in a twist, scattering some lower years with an icy glare.

In all honesty, it's tempting. Hermione's a sweetheart. Smart as any Claw, loyal as any Puff, ambitious as any Slytherin, and as brave as

they come – I could do a good deal worse – but I think not. She reminds me too much of Lily, or if that isn't disturbing enough, a female version of Remus Lupin. I wonder if subconsciously, I was drawn to her because of that. All these new memories have started making me question much of how I've lived my life up until now.

I catch up to her, "So come on, what's your big news? You mentioned something at breakfast before Dumbledore started his speech."

Her face loses some of its agitated expression. "Well, Professor McGonagall changed her mind and named me as the Gryffindor representative to the All-House squad! She placed Lynch as the alternate. Originally, each house would have two billets and the house with the Hogwarts champion would have only one. Your inclusion presented a problem and both Gryffindor and Hufflepuff only received one slot. The other day, she said she was going to go with Lynch, but changed her mind. Isn't this exciting? I wanted to tell you yesterday, but you'd already left for the Infirmary. Professor McGonagall said that my unique problem solving skills and potential outweighed the fact that I'm only a fourth year!"

"Good for you, Hermione. I know I'll be rooting for you!" I wonder if it was the Hat's comments to Professor McGonagall about her becoming a conformist touched a nerve. It probably also explains why Holly Lynch was desperate to get me back into Gryffindor colors that morning.

"I'm excited, but it might be too much. All the others are sixth or seventh years. Roger Davies is our team captain and he told me that I will have to more than pull my weight. They're going to be tests, demonstrations, and debates! I've got so very much to do!"

She prattles on excitedly and I'm glad for her. She deserves a spotlight of her own. We join the rest of the fourth years. None of them signed the Censure scroll and all of them are happy to see me, though Ron seems a little guarded. Now I have to decide how much I'll be able to tell Sirius when I see him tonight.

"Someone said they saw you heading down to the broom locker," Katie starts.

"Hello, Katie. What can I do for you?" I resist calling her "Bell." Dumbledore did ask me to try to build bridges.

She looks a tad frustrated. "This isn't easy, Harry. I was hoping to apologize."

"Okay."

"What do you mean by okay?"

I shake my head as I pull my Firebolt out of the rack and inspect it. "I mean apologize if it makes you feel better. It's over and done, as far as I'm concerned."

She relaxes a little, "Does that mean you want to try again?"

I give her a firm, "No."

"Um, why?"

"What did I say at the beginning? Chemistry - two people having fun together. We weren't really having fun and you ended up being miserable."

She looks really frustrated now. "It's just that you're so secretive, Harry. You wouldn't let me in, like wherever you went with Neville Longbottom."

I shrug my shoulders and wipe the broom with a cloth. "I'm a private person, Katie. Two people have tried to kill me since August. You kept accusing me of being too immature..."

"I'm sorry about that, really."

"I'm sure you are. I'm not immature, but I don't trust easily. More importantly, I'm not inclined to change anytime soon, and even if the guy trying to off me is gone, I still have to compete in this tournament."

That's where my focus has to be now. If the way I was acting before was making you upset and I'm not going to be making any changes, I'm just going to end up hurting you again."

Katie protests, "But you can trust me, Harry!"

I guess I have to dust off an old favorite of JP's, of course he typically used it after a shag. "Katie, the timing isn't right. I'm pretty sure that I was the part that wasn't working. Right now it just won't work. Maybe the right time is somewhere down the road, but you deserve a bloke who can make you happy, and I know I'm not that bloke. We need to try and be friends again, before we even contemplate anything else."

She stutters an "okay" and begs off, no doubt to have a bit of a cry. Harry would probably chase her down and embarrass himself, maybe even take her back thinking he wasn't good enough for her. James would've tried to send her and more importantly him off with a smile from a "goodbye shag." Happily, I'm not either of them. She'll hurt, but realize that I'm right.

Outside of the broom locker, the sun is already beginning to set, but I spy the distortions of two nearby disillusioned people. My gut says Fred and George, but my nose says perfume. I casually draw my wand and keep the broom in my hand and spin towards them. "I assume both of you heard that. It's not nice to sneak up on someone. Especially since someone just tried to kill me."

"Sorry Harry! It's me and Angelina." I hear Alicia's disembodied voice say. We were following Katie."

"She went that way. Feel free to follow."

Alicia reappears and Angelina follows suit. "It's almost sundown, all brooms are to be in the locker by then. You know the rules."

"I have an exemption from Dumbledore, Johnson."

"Very well then. Consider yourself reinstated, Potter." Johnson spins to leave.

This is one bridge that isn't getting rebuilt. "Not so fast, Johnson. I was serious when I said I wouldn't fly for you. If you're the captain next year, find another Seeker."

"What?"

"Katie had an excuse for her behavior. You didn't. I said you'd eat those words, and I fully intend to make certain of that."

"You're a real piece of work, Potter!"

"And you're a jealous little bitch, Johnson, but that's just stating the obvious. You, Lynch and Hale were the ringleaders of this idiotic Censure thing, and you used the twins to frighten all the lower years. Hale lost his Prefect badge and Lynch lost her spot on the House competition team. Did you really think that you were going to get out of this without paying the piper?"

Alicia interrupts, "Don't you think you're being a bit harsh, Harry?"

"Harsh? I don't think so. Harsh is what I will be if you two don't reign in Fred and George. Since you two lead them around by their peckers, you can deliver my warning. I'm about out of patience with them. They haven't been worth my time while I've been worried about someone trying to kill me. That's taken care of now, so my schedule is less cluttered. I'm tired of Disenchanting everything in my floor's bathroom before I use it. I'm tired of sitting in different spots at the Gryffindor table. I'm bloody well sick of Hair Growth jinxes, Babbling hexes, Jelly Legs, Shouting Earwax, and all their other assorted shenanigans."

Angelina glares at me as Alicia leads her away. Spinnet's always been the more level headed of the two. My guess is McGonagall will make her captain next year. If they tried to make me captain, Angelina would lead a revolt which Fred and George as part of it. At least practice next year should be interesting. Our Beaters will really be trying to hit me.

In a cave eight miles east of the castle I find myself face to face with Sirius Black. Dumbledore has stepped out wishing to “observe the stars in the heavens and contemplate the grandeur that is the universe,” or some such crap. The cave is fairly Spartan, a cot, a few books, a chill box, and a battered wireless set. He hadn’t exactly been living in the lap of luxury.

I cast a complex Privacy ward – far too complex for a fourth year.

“Harry, I’m impressed. That’s some nice work...”

“Shut it, Padfoot. We haven’t a great deal of time. So close your mouth and listen to what I have to say. Do you remember our encounter with the dementors?”

“Yes, Dumbledore told me that it shook loose some powers in you.”

“I lied to him.”

“What? Why?”

“Didn’t I tell you to shut it? It shook loose something all right, but it wasn’t power. I found all of Prongs’s memories in my head – the entire life and times of James Potter.”

Sirius looks skeptical. “If you’re having one on me, Harry, this isn’t a funny joke.”

“If I was having one on I’d tell you I have Lily’s memories and now I’m gender confused.”

In spite of himself, he starts laughing. Seconds later he sobers, “You’re not kidding are you?”

“Test me. Ask me anything?”

“My favorite piece of Muggle Music?”

“Paint it Black by the Rolling Stones, but isn’t that a bit obvious?”

“Yes, fine what was Peter’s?”

“It sure wasn’t YMCA. He bailed on the lot of you that night. Everyone gave him crap about liking Abba, but he really liked the Bee Gees. James and Lily danced to Clapton’s Wonderful Tonight at their wedding. You came with both the Dobson twins and won ten galleons off of Peter, who said you’d never be able to pull it off. You left with one of the McKinnon cousins when the sore loser tipped off the twins, and they pitched a fit about only being worth ten galleons.”

He looks away quickly, “Don’t torture me, Harry. Your father was my best friend. I’ve failed him and your mum.”

“Fine, here’s something no one would have told me about, Sarah Underhill. You found James in the Prefects bathroom, because Lupin could never keep that password secret from the two of you. You were pissed after about a half bottle of Firewhiskey and bragged how you sent that idiot fucker Snape to the Shrieking Shack. Do you remember what James said to you that night before he ran off to save Lupin from killing Snape? Have you ever told a soul what he said?”

“No,” Sirius said with a croak.

“He said, ‘You’re a credit to your name Black. If Remus ends up hurt or expelled because you weren’t man enough to deal with your own problems, I’ll never speak to you again.’ If you didn’t tell me, how else would I know it?”

“James?” He says cautiously.

“I’m not really him. I’m not even sure I’m Harry any more. The map shows me as Harry James Potter.”

“That’s ridiculous! We didn’t...”

“We didn’t ‘make’ the Map to show middle names. Yeah, I know. There was so much arcane magic at Godric’s Hollow that night, Merlin only knows what happened. I stopped trying to figure out if I’m Harry with his dad’s memories or James with his son’s body. I just am. Do you still have the charmed mirrors?”

“Yes, I had Remus retrieve them for me. Does he know?”

“No. Not yet. The only people that know are the Sorting Hat and Ollie Wood. Lupin and James had a falling out just before Fidelius.”

“Wood? The Keeper? Why haven’t you told Remus? He’s never said anything to me about any falling out?”

“I needed Ollie’s help and he was the best option at the time. As for Remus, it’s between me and him now. All I ask is that you let me tell him in my own time.”

There’s a gleam in the old mischief maker’s eyes, “What do you need me to do?”

“Go to France, cleanup, and for Merlin’s sake, get healthy. You look like a fucking wreck! Dumbledore’s obviously told you about the deal we worked to get your name cleared, otherwise the vow would have shut me up by now. Things are heating up again. I’ll need you on your game, Padfoot. We’ll keep in touch with the mirrors.”

“In France, I can consolidate the Black fortune. I’ll be able to send you anything you need!”

“That’s right; I need you to make some contacts as well. At some point, if Voldemort returns and another war breaks out, I may need you to come back from Gaul like Julius fucking Caesar himself with every hired wand you can buy.”

“Dumbledore won’t like it.” Sirius warns looking out the cavern towards the man in the distance.

“Dumbledore hasn’t even told me the prophecy yet.” I ignore his shocked look. “Tell me about it! He’s playing his own game and I’m not entirely sure what it is yet. Until I am, he’s out of the loop. He’s probably already this close to reforming the Order. Let him run his own brand of interference until then. If he becomes a problem we’ll deal with it then.”

“Alright. What about this tournament?”

“I’m bound to compete. If I’m in it, I might as well win it and show the world that their ‘boy wonder’ is the real thing.”

Padfoot smiles and grabs me in a big manly hug, “I was worried about you, Harry. Now, I’m worried for your opponents. Give them hell!”

I let him go. After a few seconds, manly hugs stop being manly. “Call me HJ. Giving them hell is exactly what I intend to do, starting with this broom race.”

Author’s notes – I had hoped to get this one out before 2008 started, but Turn Me Loose Chapter 4 ended up being a “double” chapter at 16000 words. This one weighs in at a respectable 11000 words. Next chapter we finally reach the start of the Triwizard Tournament with the broom race. If it comes out on the keyboard as well as it exists in my head you should be in for a treat. Visit the forums on [fanficauthors](#) and [darklordpotter](#) for discussion of this story.

Disclaimer - As usual, I still don't own the characters or the settings in the Harry Potter Universe. This is a work of fanfiction meant to entertain and hone my skills - enjoy.

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Chapter 10 – Every Rose has a Thorn

I smell water, fresh running water.

That's not an unusual thing as I travel a hundred or so yards inside of the Forbidden Forest in my Animagus form. There is a huge lake around here, after all, but the wind isn't coming from the right direction for it to be the lake.

I'm testing my hand, – well technically, it's a hoof right now, but it's still sore. With the race tomorrow, I need to really test it to make certain it'll hold up to twenty laps around the five-mile course from the castle to Hogsmeade and back. A soaking and a quick drink would be nice, but I've been over this path before and there are no streams in this part of the forest.

It seems I also smell a mystery. I keep moving, but I feel the tingle of magic, Aversion wards keeping animals back, probably humans as well. I focus wielding Occlumency against the barrier. Notice-Me-Not charms and their ilk work against people looking for something, so I focus on my sense of smell. There is water here and I am looking for it.

A cold shiver passes through my body as I cross beyond the ward line – a taste of primal fear for any animals that have made it this far. Someone dearly likes their privacy. I slow and look for telltale signs of further warding. I don't see anything, but I slowly pace forward

towards the now-audible noise of a spring. Both the grass and trees have changed slightly, making this all the more curious.

There's a row of bushes filled with some tasty looking berries, which force me to resist my urges to nibble on a few. Not until I know what I'm dealing with.

It's a bubbling hot spring, apparently from nowhere, with a little waterfall action going on. The overall effect is very beautiful and serene.

The naked witch with her wand in her hand pointing at me is also quite fetching, even if I think Fleur Delacour is a "witch with a B."

She relaxes upon realizing that I am just an "animal" and places her wand back on the silver platter floating next to her.

She addresses me in French. Some of the words don't seem right; I fill in what she is saying to the best of my ability. "Oh, you startled me. Welcome to my grotto. You are my second visitor this week. The other was a Unicorn. You must indeed be a powerful magical creature to have passed through the wards. Can you understand me?"

I make a nodding motion with my head.

"Well, an intelligent magical creature, one who can understand a real language! Here I was beginning to fear that I wouldn't encounter any intelligence in this wretched country, especially near this castle." Fleur's disdain for England is almost comical.

She typically wears her hair up when in uniform. It's a mistake on her part. Down is much better. Wet is even better. It gives her the whole water nymph motif. Of course, she could intentionally be downplaying her looks. I find myself rather enjoying the free view of her breasts, with the benefits of my superior animal vision to boot! Frigid bitch she may be, but by the gods, she has a fabulous body! I'm sure the Hat will let me hear it for being a peeping Tom, but it'd let me have it even worse if I turned and left now. If it's a choice between "damned if I do, or damned if I don't," I think I'll pick "do" and at least earn it.

“The water is fresh and the berries on the bushes are in season. I am certain you are wondering what a bit of France is doing in this backwards country.”

She spreads her arms out tracing them along the surface of the water in a rather sensual manner. “This is a tiny bit of my home enchanted by my mother and father and contained within the necklace I wear. It can only exist for an hour per day, but it is a sanctuary to where I can escape. I dearly miss my home, but there is a large world outside my family’s estate. If nothing else, I must tell myself that this experience will make me appreciate my home even more.”

Cocking her head sideways, she frowns. “Forgive me, but I do not recognize what type of animal you are. The study of Magical Creatures is not one of my strengths. I must consult my books when I return to that awful place. You clearly aren’t a regular deer, nor are you antelope or gazelle. The horn structure reminds me of the gazelle, but it is different. Still, I enjoy a good mystery.”

The water is refreshing and warm. I put my healing left foreleg in to get it in the water. That’s much better.

“You only put one leg in? Are you injured? Oh, you poor thing! Here, let me look at it.” Fleur moves gracefully through the water and comes up to the edge of the spring. If I ever need to raise some quick galleons, I can always sell this memory and call it Fleur’s Forest Follies. The rest of her nubile body equally defies description. Sure I can resist the aura, almost completely in my Pronghorn form, but there’s no reason not to appreciate what nature has clearly gifted her with.

The platter laden with soaps follows her, keeping her wand close by. It’s nice to see that she has some common sense to go with her uncommon assets. She runs her hand along the soft fur of my foreleg and inspects it carefully. Now I know that Hat is going to give me no end of shit about this. Of course, it did berate me for not learning what I can about my opponents, so who am I to question what opportunities Fate offers up to me?

I shuffle back out of her grasp as she reaches for her wand. “No, do not be worried. I am simply going to cast a Diagnostic charm and perhaps a Numbing charm. It will make your leg feel better. Still, you are justified in worrying anytime a human reaches for their wand.”

The numbing charm feels pretty good. She definitely has some skills and is clearly the most talented student the French have to offer up.

“Yes there are some signs of damage here, but it looks like you are already mending. Do you possess enhanced healing abilities? I am sure there is a story behind this wound. This forest is positively barbaric, yet they put a school here and allow vile spiders and who knows what else to exist here. It baffles me to no end, but I don’t need to tell you what silly creatures humans are, do I?”

There is less of a bitter edge to her voice. Apparently, she’s a different person when alone. Given how notoriously quick to judge people are around here, I should be more open-minded.

“There! That is as much as I can do for you. Go ahead try it out. Isn’t that better?” I respond by prancing a bit for her which makes her laugh. “My, what a proud beast you are! Sadly, our time is almost up, my sanctuary will return to the medallion around my neck. I should get dressed now. I thank you for your visit noble creature. Perhaps if you are by this way again, you will visit me once more.”

I nod my head. It’s not being a peeping Tom if she invites me back. Of course, if I were in my human form, I don’t think the invite would still apply.

Watching her commit a sin by covering that body of hers, I decide that it’s best if I don’t bother her with unnecessary details.

Damn, I really need a good shag.

“Have you been up all night?” I ask Hermione. It’s five in the morning. I can’t sleep any more. The pre-race jitters have already hit. I’ll choke down some breakfast and maybe find an empty classroom and work

off some of that nervous energy. The naughty part of my mind makes me wonder if Fleur gets this too and how she “works it off.”

Hermione answers me before I get too far down that tangent. “Well, I needed to complete my homework for the weekend so I could really start preparing for the competition. After I finished, the room was so quiet and peaceful that I didn’t see the use in going to bed. Everyone seems excited about the upcoming race. I thought you only got nervous before a Quidditch match. Stop that!”

It annoys her when I start touching her books and rearranging them. She has a table pulled up to the couch in the common room and has the start of “Bookhenge” going on. I just help it along by making the necessary architectural improvements. It’s a behavior of my friend, genus Bookus Obsessivus, which I usually don’t see until the end of the year exams. She’s really taking this team competition seriously.

I keep stacking her books and casually respond, “Maybe it’s just broom sports in general. Plus, I was only able to make three full speed runs through the course before my hand was throbbing too much. That’s seventeen less than the race. I can keep it in tight on my body during the straight-aways, but most of the direction changes can’t be done with just one hand.”

“Are you doing anything for it?”

“I gave it a nice soaking yesterday.” How nice I wasn’t about to tell her. “I’ll use a Numbing charm right up until they check us for any enchantments before the race. I’d take a chance on taking a Pain Reducer, but if I win, I know someone will demand a test and they’d show up. They’ve gotten tighter on testing in the last few years.”

“Oh that’s right! I remember hearing that the Holyhead Seeker was suspended for three matches last season when someone caught her with Aerogel smeared on her garments to cut down on the wind resistance.”

I feign surprise. “You actually listened to Ron about Quidditch? Who are you, and what have you done with Hermione Granger?”

She rolls her eyes at me. “Just because I’m not foaming at the mouth about the sport doesn’t mean that I can’t enjoy aspects of it without becoming a lunatic. I still think you should have someone check that awful goop Malfoy uses in his hair, but then again the one doing the checking would be Professor Snape...”

“So what are you studying?” I approach this question with a slight trepidation. The answer won’t be anything less than five minutes and it could stretch into an hour long discussion if I let it.

Her eyes fill with the usual excitement when someone asks that question. “I’m looking for a good idea for my presentation paper. Part of the team competition means that each participant must write an original research paper on a subject covered by the schools curriculum. The other schools receive copies and perform a cross examination in which the presenter must defend their theories and conclusions.”

“And you said all that in one breath!” The bloke that does end up as her boyfriend will certainly be impressed by her lung capacity. “So what are your ideas?”

“Roger is doing History of Magic combined with a Charms presentation. Did you know he can trace his family history back to Roman times? He has some accounts in his family scrolls about the magic used by the Romans to turn back Boudicca and the Iceni. He plans to generate a visual representation of how the battle took place using the ceiling of the Great Hall. Melinda from Hufflepuff has a flare for Runes and ...”

“That’s nice, but I wasn’t asking about Roger or the rest of the team. What are you doing?”

“Well no one wanted to do anything with Care of Magical Creatures, so I’m looking at creature rights. You know how much research I did with Buckbeak last year. I’ve been rethinking the whole house-elf situation since we talked about it.”

She does have a mound of notes. It's not so much of a touchy subject, but one that's blatantly ignored. "That's a pretty risky choice. You'll probably ruffle a few feathers with that."

"Well, in that case, let the ruffling begin! Don't get me wrong, Harry. I love magic and all the things it lets me do, but sometimes the mentality of these people positively sickens me! This blood purity rubbish is so institutionalized, but if I write a paper and deliver it in a debate format, they won't be able to simply thumb their noses at me and say that's the way it is. They'll have to defeat my position with facts that don't exist!"

There is a certain magic that exists when Hermione gets passionate about a subject. Her teammates will probably mutiny when they see the rough draft. Thought provoking is one thing, but I've no doubt that her paper will be seen as an insult. She's probably going to destroy every job opportunity she'll ever have by standing up on a podium and telling everyone present (and possibly listening in on the Wireless) what a bunch of bigots they really are. Knowing my friend, she'll even do it with a smile on her face.

I'm guessing in about four years, I'll start managing the Potter trusts. I'll need a good manager. No, I'd better leave that to the Goblins. I'll find something for her. Maybe build a laboratory, stock it, give her the key, and tell her to go nuts – before she drives the rest of us nuts that is. "Tilt a few of those windmills for me, Madame Quixote."

"I never knew you read Cervantes."

Damn! James did. Cover quickly. "There are books in my summer 'prison,' you know. Mostly, they collect dust. Dudley watched a cartoon version on the VCR when he had to do a report on it." The lie is easy enough. Guess I have to be careful about speaking French as well. Maybe, I'll check out a beginner's book from the library and make sure she sees me with it.

"I have a copy upstairs somewhere if you want to read it again?"

I tweak her a bit. "Rereading a book for recreation? People do that?"

She grimaces good-naturedly. "Oh Harry, just when I think you're finally maturing, you go and say something like that. Speaking of which, how are you and our even less mature friend getting on? I've been trying to stay out of it, but you know as well as I do, that I won't be able to resist much longer."

"I'm amazed you've held out this long. Ron continues to be pig-headed. Guess he still thinks I've been treating his family badly. I was thinking if I won this race of offering him the first prize Peregrine. It's nice, but the Firebolt is still better. More and more I'm wondering if you or Neville would like to have it."

"That's a wonderful sentiment, Harry, but I don't think I'd have a use for a real racing broom. I think Neville would be chuffed to get one, though. One thing that's impressed me this year in the midst of all this mess is how you've been going out of your way to be nice to Neville." She finishes with a grin trying to embarrass me slightly before continuing, "You could always save it for when Ron isn't being a prat. I know it's a long shot, but it's bound to happen one of these days."

"I'll keep it in mind. Why don't you go get some rest? You're clearly not studying, and when you're making jokes like this, it means you're tired. Besides, I need all the supporters I can get. There's still a bunch of people in this dorm who want to see Krum or one of the others run me into the ground."

"I suppose so, but I really should finish this chapter..."

I groan. Some things never change, even if I have.

"Nice day for a race, Harry. Are you ready?" Cedric looks over at me. Professor Flitwick and a Beauxbatons instructor are performing the final checks for Charms here at the starting line. Ludo Bagman's voice carries throughout the rapidly filling Quidditch stadium, threatening to drown out our conversation.

"Ready as I can be. It's a fast broom. Have you picked a new advisor yet?"

He gives me a goofy smile, "I turned down a lovely offer from our Divination professor. You'll notice a few of my sixth year and seventh year friends volunteering in Astronomy, grading the first through third year's work to give Professor Sinistra extra time. She'll be my new advisor."

I guess Cedric's on the other end of the spectrum from me. I've been doing a "wonderful" job of keeping the teenagers angry at me, while he's actually gainfully employing some of them. My respect for him creeps up. The Professor also seems to have benefitted from the addition of several assistants. Sadly, I can't picture many people from Gryffindor doing that for me. "Good plan there, mate."

"Thanks, though her advice won't really help me here. It's bad enough I have to fly against you, but Krum as well!" I see Krum glance over at us with a derisive look.

I figure I should clue him in. "I'm less concerned about Krum than I am the two French witches. They're actually broom racers."

"Really?" Cedric croaks out.

Now I know how much fun the Hat got out of dropping that little nugget of information on me. I gave it ten galleons this morning and Dobby was going to place the bet for the Hat. "You really should learn something about your competition mate. My guess is Gesalt Brooms is trying to lure whichever of them wins over to their racing team."

The two witches in question are standing next to us and both share a knowing smile. Fleur laughs, "Aimee already races for them. Perhaps you should do a little more research, young boy."

"And a good morning to you as well, Miss Delacour. Don't let them worry you, Cedric. I'm sure this'll be easier than our last match against each other. Just like chasing a Snitch."

Aimee snorts, while Cedric shakes his head violently, "Nice to see you can joke about it."

I shrug it off. "Any near death experience older than a month is fodder for jokes. Hello, Professor."

The Charms Master moves his wand over me and his French counterpart follows suit. "I'm glad to see you are in good spirits. Good luck to both of you. All of Hogwarts will be cheering the two of you on. How is your hand?"

Sadly, it's no secret that my hand was mangled. This of course means that my hand will be a target for any rider giving me a check during the race. "Madame Pomfrey has a pair of Pain Relievers waiting for me at the finish line. It'll hold together."

I catch the Beauxbatons instructor using a Diagnostic charm and give him a pointed look of disgust. "Yes, it's about fifty percent. I figure I'll just let you know now, so you don't have to whisper when you tell them."

The man gives me a foul look, "That spell is within my rights to cast. I am allowed to check for this by the rules."

I snap back at him. "I didn't see you using that particular Diagnostic charm on Krum. No doubt you already know that I intern in the Infirmary here, good sir. The charm you are using doesn't detect any enchantments, merely the overall physical condition. If you want to hide behind rules and justify what you do, that is all well and good. However, don't try and be coy when I call you on it!"

My outburst gathers the attention of most around us. Flitwick gives the Frenchman his own foul look and pointedly asks if he is done here.

Krum is staring me down as they move on to Cedric. "Time to see how much of a braggart you really are, English." Athena Manos is a few feet away looking bored at the obvious posturing, but absorbing every word. From what I'd gathered about her practice runs, she's either trying to fool everyone or she isn't going to be a threat.

Krum continues as I get a grin on my face. "Why are you smiling, boy? Do you think I am underestimating you? I do not underestimate

anyone! I am Krum and you are just another obstacle in my way. Unlike Diggory, you are not top in your class. You are a mediocre student at best, decent on a broom, but mostly you get by on luck.”

Aw, Viktor did his homework. Wonder how long it took Snape to turn over everything he knows about Harry James Potter. Good thing Snape doesn't really know shit. Truthfully, I'm not smiling at Krum or his attempt at intimidation. The humor is directed at the beetle clinging to his cape. Rita is getting her usual “inside scoop.” “I'm sorry, Viktor. I was just remembering a joke my advisor told me. It has to do with anal seepage and somehow you reminded me of it.”

Viktor's English isn't good enough to pick up on it, but the wide eyed expression on Cedric's face and the scowl on Athena's shows that they caught it. Krum walks away after another few mocking exchanges. Hanging out with the Hat has significantly “expanded” my vocabulary.

Cedric leans in as we see Krum getting an explanation of what the “brown squirts” actually are. “Harry, I can't believe you just said that!”

“He came over here to rile us up or maybe just fuel his own ego. I'm only trying to humor him before I shut him up. Either way, I can't really lose.”

“Why's that?”

“He keeps complaining that I'm nothing but a boy. If he finishes ahead of me, he beat a boy. If I finish ahead of him, he was beaten by a boy. I want to win, but I'll settle for just finishing ahead of him.” The glimmer in Diggory's eyes tells me that he has aspirations of his own.

Fireworks erupt from nearby and Bagman's voice rises to an impossibly loud level.

“Ladies and Gentlemen! It's time for the racers to take their places at the starting line. The waiting is over and the Triwizard Tournament is about to begin! Who will ride to glory? Krum? Potter? Delacour? Diggory? Beaucourt? Manos? Twenty grueling laps around this five

mile course will decide the winner. The victor will receive ten points in the overall competition and the brand new Peregrine racing broom that they rode to victory! This new racing broom from Gesalt brooms is on display at various points in the stadium and will be on sale starting tomorrow! Joining me at the starting line is legendary broom crafter, Vanya Gesalt. She will be today's ceremonial starter.

And now, it's time for the Triwizard Tournament to begin!"

A blast from Gesalt's wand and we're off, accelerating over the audience's heads and out of the stadium while jockeying for position. The two French witches surge forward, but the slower moving Athena Manos forces them to adjust their trajectory, and Krum shoots into the lead. Aimee Beaucourt is right behind him, with Fleur and me fighting for third place. Too much Quidditch makes me leery of objects right next to my broom. I brake too soon going into turn one and Fleur slips a broom length in front of me. She flies like she is one with her broom, with a fluidness and grace that few can ever hope to match.

I happen to be one of those few. Maybe it's the Pronghorn in me, but I know I could out-fly James Potter. Compacting my body to lessen the wind resistance, I do my best to "get small" and follow in her wake. Muggles call it "drafting"; the magical world calls it "stealing wind."

Raw speed – it's all the adrenaline I could ever want! The rush of the wind fills my lungs. Lying forward and pouring it on, I lean into the third turn and hear the screams of a group of people floating on their brooms outside the course markers. The first corkscrew is coming up.

Passing through the second ring that makes up the turn, my eyes check to make certain that the band at the tip of my broom is still green. Fail to pass through a ring and the band turns red. This corkscrew is a vertical drop through four offset rings with only about ten feet separating the last ring from the ground; in this case it's the water of the lake.

The rings can only fit two of us through at a time. I'm still in fourth place, with Cedric right on my tail. The two French witches and Krum

are ahead of us. Aimee's trying to move on Krum -- oh, that's a hell of a check. She spun pretty hard off that bump. Looks like I'm in third place now as she tries to recover. Krum flies in a vastly different manner than both Fleur and me. He wrestles with his broom, using his small, muscular frame to pit his magic and sinew against the Peregrine. The Bulgarian rides his broom like a wild beast!

A broom race is a very long obstacle course. In Unlimited races sanctioned by the International Broom Racers Association, teams use whatever broom their team chooses. The Restricted Category, like this one, limits all contestants to using the same models to level the playing field. Most of the action in these races takes place in the turns and corkscrews, which is where the crowds tend to congregate. There are turns, which are two of these floating rings near each other, to force a direction change. There are also six "screws" - two that force you to go straight up, two that go down and one each for left and right.

Shifting my weight and nosing over, I dive through the top and Sloth Roll left to make the second ring. The rotation continues and I can make out the merfolk staring straight up at me from underneath the barely moving water. Coming out of the screw, Cedric's a little wild and clips the water a bit. How did he manage that screw at that speed? He's making a run on my right side. This is a long straight-away. I max the broom out and hold him off, but he's less than two feet behind me. He's outweighs me by almost two stone, so I can't out accelerate him, but the girls are even lighter than I am. Turn four is a "soft turn" and I'll be able to keep my speed up, but he'll try and bump me off the course at the second screw or in turn five.

I'd forgotten how good Diggory is on a broom. No doubt he wants to finish ahead of me to prove that it's the Firebolt that makes the difference when we play Quidditch. Guess I'm not the only bloke flying with a chip on my shoulder.

Guessing when Cedric is going to make his move, I slow and swerve, bumping him first. The smack is unexpected on his part but now, instead of slowing into the upward screw, I'm accelerating. That separation gets me at least five broom lengths of breathing room. Without his threat, I can concentrate on catching that blue spec in

front of me. Let's see if I can get on Fleur's tail and "draft" her some more.

There are far worse places I could be.

Those that aren't on brooms at the turns and corkscrews are in the Quidditch stands. They have turns nine and ten, the other downward screw, and the start/finish line in their view. Everyone wants to see one of us do a face plant right into the field. The cheers ring out loudly as I come through the first lap in uncontested third place. Bagman's amplified shouts fill the air, but I'm moving too fast to really make out what he's saying. Starting the second lap by flying just slightly over the crowd's heads, I spare a glance over my shoulder and see that Aimee has already started to close on Cedric.

I'm in a very good spot right now. Cedric and Aimee will slow each other up. Fleur will likely challenge Krum within three laps to give her ample time to recover if something goes wrong. From what little I can tell Viktor is still flying fearlessly, but Fleur is content to chase him down gradually and strike probably coming out of a soft turn, where the odds that any contact will slow him down just as much and she can out-accelerate him.

Thinking too hard is distracting me from my task. The ache in my damaged left hand will start soon. Occlumency protects my mind and can help me block some of it, but the rest I'll just have to fly through. Concentrate on the course. Make each turn and corkscrew count.

I'm close enough to see Fleur make her first feint towards Krum. He blocks her easily – too easily. She's going to dog him, annoy him, and wear him down as he fights her off every few turns. It's as much mental as it is physical. Provided all hands remain on the broom shaft, bumps and contact are legal; a grab is not. There are other fouls such as ramming and spearing that I need to be cautious about.

The merfolk are making crude gestures at me by the fourth lap. Aimee wiggled past Cedric when I wasn't looking, but I'm ahead of her by better than twenty broom lengths. Diggory isn't letting her go

that easily. If the second Durmstrang champion doesn't pick it up soon, she'll be in danger of being lapped by the midway point of the race. Of course, there's a chance that it's a strategic maneuver on Krum's part. If Athena lets him by unimpeded and starts blocking Fleur like she did at the start, it'll allow Krum to build a better lead.

By the end of lap eight, I'm maybe six lengths behind Fleur and Viktor as they continue to battle. Aimee has also cut my lead in half, but if she's smart, she's going to let me get up there and try to mess up the number one and two spots and try to seize the opportunity. Exiting the turns, I let off my grip to rest my throbbing hand. Don't let up Potter, look for your window and make your move.

Exiting turn nine, Fleur just brushes Viktor's tail twigs with the tip of her broom! That's arrogant as hell! She's basically telling him to move or she'll move him. Angrily, Viktor gives her a hard waggle which drops his speed, trying to force a collision. She tries to go low and right. Contact! Both of them bounce and veer losing some of their forward momentum. Now or never! I elevate and push while they're trying to regain their speed. Straight over Krum's shoulder and cut hard into turn ten. Bringing it into the stadium, there's a new leader and his name is Potter! The crowd is screaming their lungs out.

I resist the urge to look back. I'll feel it when one of them gets close to me. Aimee should be closing on them as well. There's nothing in front of me now except Manos waiting to be lapped. She'll try to jam me up and let the others close on me playing the spoiler role.

Laps blend into each other. I rest my hand where I can, but more and more, I feel the pressure of being in the lead. The short flowing cape of Athena Manos is getting ever nearer as the cheers grow louder with each lap. Her technique is too sloppy for this to be intentional; she's just not very good. Lap thirteen has me right up on her. Her clumsy attempts at blocking me aren't really working, but Viktor and Fleur creep ever closer. I'll take Manos in the first screw and see if I can give her a dunk in the drink. It'll be a move of inches, but if I pull it off it'll be epic!

I run up on her in turn three forcing another clumsy block while jostling her, and getting another feel for how she responds to it. She

swipes at me and I pull alongside of her. Okay, I hadn't counted on her being that sloppy! New plan, we can go through the screw side by side. We bump all the way through the four rings but I stay higher and give her the kiss of death when we bottom out splashing her into the water to the shouts of the people circling nearby. My boots drip water as I skim over the surface of the lake.

It costs me though. Fleur and Viktor are close now as I get up to speed. They're obviously not fighting anymore, wanting to draw near me before trying to make a move. I reach behind with my right hand and brush the twigs, checking for any damage from the collision. I'm pleased to find none.

Lap sixteen finds me still in the lead, but I can feel them breathing down my neck, as certain as my left hand has developed a heartbeat of its own. My teeth grind with every exertion of pressure from my clenched fist, but I hold on. The area through Hogsmeade is full of Durmstrang students and Slytherins. Karkaroff said that as soon as the race is over his students are free to visit the town, and they look like they plan on taking full advantage of it.

Krum makes his first move on turn five of lap seventeen. Not so fast there, "Krummy." I've come this far and I'm not about to give up yet. I bump him back on turn six and through the right hand corkscrew. He's a foot or two behind me as we race side by side. Fleur's drafting both of us now and waiting for her chance to take us both. I can see the predatory look in her eyes. Viktor on the other hand, has the constant scowl I've grown accustomed too. The tip of his broom smacks at my injured hand, but I keep it near the tip and out of his reach, while approaching turn seven. He's trying to work the inside while rubbing against me. I rub right back. His elbow smacks against my back a few times and he starts to slip back as we enter the turn. I beat him back again!

Or did I? The next part happens so fast, I can't really tell what happened. He slid back and into me and my broom yawed hard. Bastard got his hand on the back of my broom and must have "twigged" me! I spin hard and out of control. Pain shoots up my leg when I sideswipe the thick wooden hoop. There's the sharp crack of twigs and a bone breaking.

Instinctively, I pull up. Broom riders scatter while I fight to retain control. Pain blurs my senses. I slow and inspect the damage. My right lower leg bone is broken. I try to steer through the pain. My damaged broom slows and I feel back there. Blood is coming from where the twigs dug into my calf. The bone's not protruding, so the blood loss will be minimal. The race official flies over to me and asks if I can continue.

"Did you see Krum foul me?" I demand with my hand probing parts of my leg checking for more injuries."

She answers flatly, "No. The two of you were flying too closely and spectators obstructed the view."

There's nothing more to be said except, "I can continue." The witch sends off colored sparks indicating an injury with rider continuing.

Cedric, Aimee, and Athena get by me while I'm trying to gingerly pry my calf off of the three or so twigs piercing the skin. The Durmstrang witch was a lap down, and if I can hold her off, I'll at least pick up a point. There's no way I'll catch any of the others.

"Oh, tough luck there, Potter! Looks like you can't handle playing with the adults after all," The ferret on his Nimbus circles nearby his voice amplified by his magic as I prepare to start back up.

I don't even bother with a reply and speed off. I'll let my pranks answer him - often. I can still place fifth if I can hold off Athena. It's a good broom. Even with a third of the twigs bent or broken, it's flying near top speed. If Gesalt wants a quote from me, they've got it.

Coming through the stadium, I can see everyone pointing at me and hear the shouts. Some might even have gotten a drip or two of the red stuff on them. The others are already probably in Hogsmeade, but I'll be damned if I let one of them lap me.

Fleur manages to get within one turn of lapping me when I cross the finish line for my final trip around the course. At least it isn't Krum!

Five more miles with Athena trying to close the gap, but she won't get there.

There's a bit of lightheadedness as I reenter the stadium and make the final corkscrew. I cross the finish line and turn my broom slowly towards the medic tent. There's a heated discussion going on at the judge's tables. Karkaroff and Dumbledore are exchanging a few words, with all the other riders there. Poppy is just staring at me as I float towards her. I've never seen her quite this angry. Don't know if it's a good thing or a bad thing.

"Hover over the table, Mr. Potter. Roll to the bottom and land on your back."

She runs her wand along the leg and scowls at the people at the edge of the tent looking in. "Tell me, Mr. Potter. Was the one point you earned in this competition for finishing in fifth place worth flying nearly twenty miles with a broken leg?"

"Ask me at the end of the Tournament and I'll have an answer for you. For now, let's just call it pride."

"Do not mistake pride for stubbornness, Mr. Potter. It is an all too common mistake. How is your hand?" She sets the leg manually. I suppose she's doing it to prove a point.

"The one bright spot in all of this is that I don't really notice my hand anymore. Could I trouble you for a Pain Reducing potion, perhaps a Numbing charm if you don't have a tonic handy?"

She gives me a thin smile, "Of course. In my recklessness to treat your injuries, I overlooked your comfort. Blood Replenisher first and then the Pain Reducers." I grab the three vials and drink them slowly. Poppy applies a Numbing charm to my lower right leg. Ah, that's better!

"I will return in a few minutes when I have dispersed this crowd and we can transport you to the infirmary." She exits and McGonagall enters. She'd been keeping guard at the door and with Poppy out

there coming as close to swearing as I've ever heard her, my head of house comes in for a visit.

The witch dispenses with the formalities of asking about my leg and hand. I'm awake and the nurse has stepped outside. That's more than enough for her. "I've lodged a protest on your behalf, but the race official at that marker was obscured by the crowd, which was largely composed of ..."

"Durmstrang and Slytherin students." I finish for her.

"Yes, Miss Delacour was the only one with any chance of seeing if Mr. Krum committed a foul. She says that she did not see it, since she was positioning herself to pass. Headmaster Karkaroff pointed out that even if his student committed a foul by current IBRA standards, they do not govern this particular race and only the rules of the Triwizard Tournament apply here."

They prepared their defense ahead of time, cagey bastards. Fine, I concede this round to them. "Nothing to be done then. Makes me wonder if he would have done it to Delacour."

"Indeed. If you will permit me to act as your spokesperson, I will extend your congratulations to Miss Delacour on her victory and to Miss Beaucourt, Mr. Diggory, and Miss Manos on a well-flown race. Your leg and hand should be healed before next weekend and the first round of dueling. You will report to my quarters on Wednesday night and we will make certain that you and Mr. Diggory are schooled in proper dueling techniques. Professor Flitwick would normally do this, but as he is one of the referees for the event, it is not permitted. I have loaned Miss Granger my personal copy of a book called Defensive Dueling. I would highly encourage you to seek her out."

She fishes in her handbag and removes a sealed envelope. "This also arrived for you this morning from the Ministry. It contains a provisional Apparition license. You will reserve a block of time from eight in the morning to noon to learn the art of Apparition. As the tournament was conceived for people that are 'of age,' some of the later tasks may require this skill. I would encourage you to seek out some of the sixth or seventh years for assistance in this."

I like the idea of slighting Krum by not acknowledging him. "Thank you Professor. I appreciate it." Defensive Dueling, James read it a back in his fifth year. Good introductory manual focusing on the essentials of shielding yourself during a duel. Good thing that the duels aren't right now or I'd probably kill Krum. I'll have to consider my strategy for my first round of dueling. Do I want to finish in the middle of the pack or do I come out with wands a-blazing?

Who am I kidding? The moment I step onto a dueling platform, I'll go all out. I have too much James in me not to get competitive. Minerva congratulates me again on my perseverance and moves to leave. I hear a few words exchanged and the flap to the tent moves back as McGonagall allows Aimee and Fleur into the tent.

"Ladies?" I arch an eyebrow at them.

Aimee smiles, speaking in French, "You flew well today, Harry Potter. We wanted to stop by and congratulate you." Fleur doesn't look all that pleased.

"Thank you. Both of you were every bit as good as I expected. What did they say about the protest?"

Fleur purses her lips and shakes her head at me. "The IBRA did not, in fact, sanction this event and their rules do not apply. Even had I seen Viktor Krum with his hand on your broom, there was no foul by the rules governing this race. I suggest you be satisfied knowing that you flew well, anything else makes you look both petulant and spoiled."

"Excuse me?"

"Did the collision addle you? Protests are for those that are whiners, not winners! I am leaving now." She spins on her heel smartly and walks away.

Aimee shoots Fleur's back an exasperated look while turning back to me. "With more training, you could easily fly professionally."

I resist mentioning that with the end of the race that Fleur has returned the broomstick to its rightful place – shoved up her arse! Instead, I choose the higher path. “Thank you for the compliment.”

“You earned it. Gesalt is always looking for new talent. My Aunt is also the manager for their racing team. She had kind words to say about your abilities when I landed.”

“Were they kinder than Fleur’s?”

She smiles, “Fleur dislikes large crowds.”

“Best I can tell, she dislikes all of England.”

This gets an amused laugh from the brunette. “Very true. Do not be offended if she seems cold. She is a very private person and it is her way. From her perspective, everyone wants something from her; she is a celebrity.”

With no small amount of sarcasm, I answer. “I think I can identify with that.”

“Yes, I suppose you can. My aunt asked that you keep Gesalt Racing in mind as you approach your sixteenth birthday. Contrary to the evidence in front of you, the sport tends to have fewer injuries than Quidditch and the average career lasts much longer.”

“A little early recruiting?”

She feigns innocence rather well, “Of course not! I am just here to congratulate you on a race well flown. I would never dream of trying to influence you. Now, if you will excuse me, I must go find Fleur and ensure she does not inflict bodily harm on those wishing to congratulate her.”

I allow a few visitors in the Infirmary. The “agreement” means that one of them is Rita. She’s just leaving with her quotes when the next group enters – Ollie, Penny, and Hermione.

"You looked good up there Harry, except for the tough break at the end there, mate." Ollie starts with a bad pun.

"Thanks, second stringer."

He gets a big old grin on his face. "Not for much longer! I've already heard that next season they're going to have an open competition. The bloke in front of me hasn't been living up to that new contract they gave him, and they feel he needs a bit of motivation!"

"Good on you, Ollie."

"Our General Manager was in the stands today. He liked that you flew through the pain, and told me to send his regards and hopes for a speedy recovery."

Hermione interrupts, "Harry, I can't believe you're not angrier about all this! This vile Viktor Krum is going to get away with it."

I shrug, "Depends on your perspective, Hermione. Penny, I'll give you the same quote I just gave Rita. Viktor Krum employed a questionable tactic during our race because his ego couldn't tolerate the idea that he might not be the best flier out there. That distinction clearly belongs to Fleur Delacour, but were it not for my injured hand holding me back, he wouldn't even be the second best rider in that race."

Penny's brow furrows, "Are you certain you want to bait him right before the dueling begins?"

"If he loses it during a duel, there'll be too many witnesses. A cheap shot in front of a crowd will cost him endorsements. Besides, I'm not worried about dueling Krum."

Hermione looks furious. "Harry! They teach both Dueling and Dark Arts at that school. Don't be foolish!"

"But they don't teach fighting Death Eaters, or facing down dozens of Dementors, or a Basilisk. I'll be careful on the dueling platform, but I

won't be intimidated by him." Only Ollie knows that I have the memories and life experiences of a Professional Duelist at my disposal. Penny and Hermione are obviously worried.

"Do you even know the Protego Shield yet, Harry?"

"I'll be fine, Hermione. Trust me."

Penny also expresses concern, "Dodging will only get you so far, Harry."

I must have been under a Silencing charm as Hermione just keeps going, "I've been going over the wand motions and can already cast one. It's very important you master this spell in the next few days."

Scooping my wand up, I generate one for her and switch the wand to my left hand and do it again. It's the only way to silence her. Well technically it isn't the only way...if she wants me to practice my Stunner, I can knock her out for awhile. Either way, I've no intentions of casting a simple Shield or a basic Stunner during any of these duels. I do a quick little spell that identifies any insects in the room, looking for any beetles, but find none. Rita must be on to her next victim.

"Like I said Hermione, I'll be fine."

"When did you learn to do that?"

"I was very busy this summer and I'm not just up in this ward brewing potions and cleaning bedpans. Remember the Switching spell in Transfiguration? If I really wanted to walk right now, I'd just switch my leg for Ollie's and let him rehab it."

"Hey!"

"Don't worry, I won't. I just said I could do it if I wanted."

Hermione quiets, but I know I'm not going to hear the end of it. She bides her time while I visit with Penny and Ollie, trying to give my

journalist friend all the quotes I gave Rita plus a few more. When they leave, Hermione lingers.

“Harry, you’re keeping things from me, aren’t you? And I’m not just talking about the vow you took.”

“Yes.” I gesture to the bed next to me and she sits.

“But we’re friends...”

“And I hope we always will be.” I say.

I can almost see the wheels in her head turning. “Is this why you gave me the book on Occlumency? It’s not just about Snuffles, is it? There’s more to it than that.”

“How have you been getting on with Occlumency?” Best way to answer her is with doublespeak.

She mutters, “I’ve been so consumed by getting ahead on my coursework so that I could have time for the Inter-School competition that I haven’t really been able to do much with it. If you need me to, I’ll resign from the squad.”

“No.”

“You might need my help.”

“I might, but I have others I can lean on if it comes to that. You earned your opportunity on the school team and you deserve a chance to be in the spotlight. Years ago, you dismissed yourself as books and cleverness, but there’s much more to you than that. My secrets can wait.”

“I’d be willing to take a vow of secrecy.”

“It wouldn’t stop a Legilimens or someone using a truth serum. I’ll ask you to trust me. It’s too important for a vow, but not important enough for you to give up something you want this badly.”

“You sound awfully certain for a person nursing a broken leg.”

“She’s got a point, Potter.” I look and see Dobby standing there holding the Sorting Hat. No one has passed my privacy ward. “You owe me sixty galleons.”

“You already borrowed twenty from me. It’s nice to see you too, Hat. I’d been wondering where my advisor was.”

“Fine, you owe me forty galleons and what would I have been doing here anyway? I didn’t realize that I’d need to advise you against flying into solid objects. I was beginning to believe that you weren’t actually that stupid. Do you need reminders to inhale and exhale? I suppose I could tell you how badly you performed today, but I think you already know that. If you intend on winning, you have ground to make up.”

“Thought you were going to wager on Fleur.”

The Hat harrumphs, “As did I, but apparently this sniveling ball of monkey shit you employ didn’t like the idea of me betting on the witch to win, so instead, this retarded elf put the bet on you.”

Dobby’s turn to mutter, “Nasty Hat wanted the Great Harry Potter to lose!”

“Insane vermin. Where were you when your Master needed assistance?” Damn thing really does know how to get at everyone’s weak points.

“Dobby was where Master Harry Potter told him to be, listening to nasty Hat make nasty comments. You are not a good piece of magic. Dobby knows this.”

Hermione starts, “Master Harry Potter...”

The Hat continues yanking Dobby’s chain, “An ironic statement coming from a house-elf of all things. Do us all a favor, Dobby. Shut the fuck up.”

Dobby tosses the Hat away from it and runs over to me. "Can Dobby get Harry Potter anything? Dobby is sorry that Albus Dumbledore takes Harry Potter's map. Dobby wants Harry Potter to trust house-elves. Winky was a bad house-elf."

The witch next to me crosses her arm and I get that sinking feeling in my gut that happens whenever the elf starts speaking in a crowd. "Harry, do you own Dobby now? I'd like an answer. Who's Winky?"

"No, I'm paying him on a trial basis, but I'm leaving the option open. Dobby, let's not talk about Winky anymore."

"Right. Dobby will not talk about the bad elf who tried to kill Harry Potter."

"Dobby!"

"Harry!"

I don't know how much more of Dobby's "help" I can take right now. "Dobby, thank you for bringing the Sorting Hat here. In the future, just ignore any 'nasty comments' it makes. Would you go to my dorm and bring my book bag on my bed here? I need it. After that, how about something to eat."

He disappears and I'm left looking at a frustrated Hermione Granger and a bemused hat. I guess I need to explain this, "Winky was the elf owned by the Death Eater trying to kill me. She died during the battle trying to protect her Master." I pause for a second searching for words that won't come. "It appears that anything beyond that is protected by my vow of secrecy."

That answer doesn't satisfy her. "This reinforces my argument that House-elves should not be owned, Harry."

The Hat offers its opinion, "Really Granger, try hanging around some of them, especially Potter's little dipshit. You'll find they likely wouldn't know what to do with freedom if it was given to them. If they did figure out what to do with it, we'd be in even deeper trouble. Go down in the kitchens and watch them work. See how happy they are."

“They don’t know any better! What right do we have to enslave them?”

“And you do? Fine Granger, you seem to like masturbating to logic puzzles; try this one. What if I told you that house elves were the bound spirits of imps that formerly roamed this land and caused mayhem and chaos everywhere?”

“Are they really?”

“Tell me you did not just say that, Granger. I thought you once had some potential. Yes, house-elf sounds more pleasing to the ear than minor demon, you mental midget. So, tell me, should we free the demons and hope that centuries of servitude will prevent them from reverting to form? Look how much grief Potter’s causes just trying to serve him. If that idiot ghost taught anything other than Goblin Wars, you might actually know something about real history!”

I can honestly say that I didn’t know that either, but then again, I haven’t been alive for over a thousand years. This is probably another example of those dirty little secrets.

“Hermione, you could interview the Sorting Hat for material for your research paper.”

“Could I? It’s your advisor. I wouldn’t want to take it away from you.” She sounds both wary and excited at the same time.

“What do I get out of this, HJ? I’m working with you, not for you.”

“You can quit being a sphincter about money; we’ll take the trip to Italy already.”

“In that case, I’m at your disposal, Granger.”

“What’s in Italy? Are you going to Rome?”

I gesture with my hand, “Don’t ask – just don’t ask. You don’t want to know. Listen, I’m starting to get tired. Hermione, why don’t you take

the hat with you and come back tomorrow? Hat, go easy on her. Don't traumatize her too much."

Hermione gives me a peck on the cheek and a hug. "I forgot to mention that Ron was a bit put out that he wasn't on your visitor list." Her look becomes more serious, "I told him that maybe he should consider being a better friend. Honestly, he is so frustrating sometimes."

"I thought you were staying out of it."

"In my defense, he came to me. Though, I'd venture today that if the positions were reversed, you'd be a bit more understanding, instead of whining about not being on the visitor's list."

"Tell him that if he wants to come by tomorrow, I'll add him. I was in a bit of pain when Madame Pomfrey was asking." Do I really need this shit today?

I already know the answer. No, I don't. Lying back on the bed, I try to erase most of this day from my mind. Hopefully, somewhere in France, Padfoot is in bed with two women and a four pack of Rejuvenation potions.

Neville comes by the next day carrying the Sunday edition of the Daily Prophet. Ron has yet to show here since I told Poppy to let him in if he came. It makes me wonder why I even bothered. I can obviously still be friends with Hermione. Maybe I will even be better friends with her now that I'm a bit more focused on the more important things in life.

My new favorite male fourth year Gryffindor and I sit and read through the paper which recaps the race. Rita's article is her usual spiteful self. At least the majority of the rancor isn't directed at me. Of course, if she suddenly reverses herself and starts acting nice, well everyone would see through that about the time they finish the article. Instead, she focuses on how much danger I'm in and how unprepared I am for the tasks ahead.

I guess those are the tradeoffs one has to make. Neville and I chat for a time as Poppy tends to a couple of students with minor ailments before releasing them.

Our quiet discussion is interrupted by the Head Girl entering. Melinda Turpin is Lisa's older sister and a Hufflepuff. If Lisa is anywhere close to looking like her sister in three years, I'll have to keep her in mind. "Good morning. The Headmaster asked that I come retrieve you for the assembly. Are you able to walk on your leg?"

"I've already taken a Pain Reducer, and Madame Pomfrey has me in a walking cast. I'll see you there, Neville."

I watch my housemate run off and test my leg. In the Muggle world, I'd be off this thing for months, but magic is truly wondrous. By the coming weekend, it'll be like it was never broken. Considering crutches or a cane for a moment, I decide not to. Krum doesn't deserve the satisfaction. Turpin waits outside while I dress. In reality, I Transfigure the garments I'm wearing into everyday wear.

Melinda walks slowly beside me and doesn't really talk until I start, "Hermione says you're doing runes for the competition team. She sounded very interested."

Obviously, Ancient Runes is Melinda's passion. I seem to recall some announcement a few years ago that she received the highest score on her Runes O.W.L. in a century. Thanks to JP's memories, I'm fairly conversant in them as well, at least enough to follow along with what she's babbling on about. She's just slightly shorter than I am, and keeps her brown hair straight and shoulder length. From what little I know about her, she's dating the Slytherin seventh year prefect, Octavius Pucey. One of the Muggleborns stuck him with the name "Octapucey" after a film, and it has stuck. As one of Snape's little enforcers, I have no love for him.

"So what are you planning on after Hogwarts?" Two minutes is enough Ancient Runes for today. Just because I can now understand what she's talking about doesn't mean I've developed a sudden fascination with the subject.

“Oh, I’ve got several offers from the Ministry, but I’m probably going to take a year and travel to visit some of the actual locations where all these runes are located. Gringotts has an interesting offer for me to join a Curse Breaking team as one of their translators.”

“But?”

“The job is in South America and Incan isn’t my strong suit. Octavius isn’t too thrilled at the prospect of me traveling either. He’s made that perfectly clear.”

I roll my eyes, “The only jobs with more travel in them than Runes specialists and Curse Breakers belong to Herbologists. My guess is that he wants a trophy girlfriend on his arm at all his fancy parties. You actually having a career might interfere with that.”

She looks at me critically. “This is none of your business, Potter.”

I ignore her to make a point. “So, was he upset that Snape left him off the competition team?”

“He hasn’t really said.” She answers evasively.

“Sure, he hasn’t. Especially since Roger is leading it up.” There’s no love lost between Roger Davies and Pucey. The Slytherin swore that he was going to be Head Boy this year as well. Hell, he probably thought he was going to be the Hogwarts representative in the tournament. All in all, it just hasn’t been his year. Let’s see if I can add to his woes by getting Melinda to dump him.

“Didn’t I just tell you to get your nose out of my business?” Burrow far enough and you hit a nerve. That’s probably the right spot to plant a seed or two of discord.

“I’m not trying to start a row with you, only offer a bit of outside perspective. All I’m saying, Melinda, is that you’re a smart and attractive witch with a true gift for Runes. Don’t let a bloke hold you back from something you enjoy doing just because his ego can’t

handle dating a witch more successful than he is. It'd be a damn shame to see that kind of talent going to waste."

She looks at me thoughtfully. The flattery seems to have softened her cross look. "I appreciate your concern, Potter, but I have things under control, thank you very much. Come on, let's get to the assembly."

I hadn't planned on starting my revenge with Pucey, but I seem to recall him being out there at the turn when Krum fouled me. Even if he wasn't, well... I'm sure he's done something to warrant it.

JP would have probably tried to work his charm on the Head Girl and see how far he could get. He and Sirius had a game collecting "points." Any girl you shagged in your year or above was worth one point. Prefects were worth two and the Head Girl was worth five. JP quit the game after the death of his parents. However, JP didn't have a busted leg to hobble on. On one hand, I might have developed – or is it reacquired – a petty, vindictive streak. On the other hand, telling a pretty girl that it's okay to stand up to her pompous arse of a boyfriend is really helping her.

Who knew mischief making could be such a noble cause?

Most of the students are already in the Great Hall as Melinda leads me up to the stage. I grab a seat next to Cedric, who seems pleased to see me and exchanges a few words with his fellow Puff.

Viktor Krum gives me a smug look. Yeah, just wait until the duels, maggot. You're mine. Athena politely nods and continues the conversation she's having with Aimee. Fleur is doing her best to look cold and aloof. She has it down to an art form. When my leg is better, I'll have to try and find her little grotto again. Of course it would reinforce her opinion of how barbaric this place is, if my Pronghorn form showed up favoring another leg.

A few minutes pass before Igor Karkaroff stands and motions for the doors to be shut. In thickly accented English he begins, "Today, we speak of the coming tasks in the Triwizard Tournament. Broom race

is over and now we duel! Only two outcomes in duel, victory or defeat! It is Trial of Combat. First duel is with wands on Saturday. Three duels fought on the first day and two on the second day. Each champion on this stage will duel all five others. Four weeks from first duel is second. This one is with staff, like days of old. Winner is person that remains on the platform. Loser is on ground staring up at winner. Third duel is months away, with wands again. Each duel won is worth one point in the overall competition.”

Staff fighting, hadn’t expected that! Nothing wrong with a tradition that involves beating each other with sticks! Here Dudders thought the magical world was backwards! James played around with staves as a kid, but that was a long time ago, and last I checked, I’m still in the body of a fourteen-year-old boy. I glance at Cedric. He’s a tall, lanky, ball of muscle. It’ll be interesting to see him go up against a shorter, more compact Krum.

Karkaroff lets the murmuring die off before continuing. “There is reward for the duelist with most points in all three rounds of dueling. Telemachus Manos, three time champion duelist, gives winner two months of private dueling lessons at his school in Greece.”

More than a few eyes wander to Athena. How closely is she related to Telemachus? She sure wasn’t picked for her broom flying skills. This adds a layer of complexity to things.

“Now, we must talk about a task weeks away. Champions must prepare for this task ahead of time amidst everything else. It is Trial of Ingenuity.” He paces a lot while speaking. His steps bring him back to something covered by a blanket. With a flourish he whips the blanket away revealing a scale model of a room and a knife with a jeweled handle.

“This room is Puzzle Room. Puzzle Room challenges the contestants.” Karkaroff taps the model with his wand and a much larger image appears in the air with a stick figure standing just inside the doorway. The former Death Eater holds the knife up high. “The goal is to retrieve this dagger from the other side of the room! This dagger once wielded by Wiglaf in service to King Beowulf! It is very

sacred relic. The room does not give up its prize easily. Earth, Water, Air, and Fire protect Wiglaf's dagger. Look closely."

The figure steps into the room. The outer walls and ceiling erupt in flames. For the first thirty feet, there is ground, but pillars of solid rock rise and move to block the figures progress. Earthen hands reach out to grasp the figure's feet. His wand moves the figure forward. "Earth or fire must be overcome first."

The ground ends with water covering the next portion of the room. "Now is next choice, water and air will try to stop champions. Which do you challenge?" Geysers of water appear mixed in with whirlpools. Dangerous looking vortexes of air swirl across the surface of the water. A small, but brightly burning ring of fire is the last barrier protecting the dagger. Karkaroff makes the figure move to the end and retrieve the image of the relic and return to the starting line.

"Looks too easy in my picture, does it not? This I warn you, is very dangerous in Puzzle Room. Not for the weak-hearted and certainly not for children. Pulverized by earth, burned by fire, scalded or drowned by water, and battered by air – those are the choices. Puzzle Room is even more dangerous because the champions do not have their wands!"

The crowd gasps at that. Gee, I wonder who the "children" comment was directed at? Karkaroff finishes. "Only what each champion brews or enchants may be brought into the Puzzle Room. To win, they must solve the puzzle ahead of time. Is that not right, Albus?"

Dumbledore stands, "Thank you, Igor. Indeed, the Puzzle Room is an enchanter's challenge that will test the resourcefulness and problem-solving skills of our champions. They may brew potions and craft items to aid them in retrieving the Dagger of Wiglaf. This momentous event will take place the day following the Yule Ball. The champions will have until then to devise a winning strategy that allows them to retrieve the weapon in the least amount of time. Hogwarts will be providing our six budding enchanters and brewers with their own workshop warded to allow access only to them and their advisors. The champions will have full use of our raw materials. If we do not have something, the contestant may order the raw material and have

it delivered. However, all the enchanting, brewing, and runes carving must be their own work. Each contestant will be tested with Veritaserum and questioned by myself, Madame Maxim, and Headmaster Karkaroff to ensure that the work is indeed that of the champion.”

I look for and find a leering Snape. His gaze bores into me. There’s a sharp thrust of Legilimency, but I look away when I first sense it.

Dumbledore smiles in his genial manner looking at all six of us. “I look forward to seeing what imaginative solutions the six of you devise. Portraits from each individual school will be installed in the room to watch for anyone attempting unauthorized access.”

Turning back to the crowd after giving us the more specific instructions, he finishes, “Now, this is the part you are all wondering about, the prize for the winner of this task. Naturally, we are not going to give the winner this heavily enchanted dagger, but I have something nearly as priceless. For the person that completes the task in the least amount of time, I have a rare and valuable prize – a Pensieve.”

Dumbledore pulls the covering next to him away and there is a simple looking basin that appears worn and very old. It’s somewhat lacking compared to some that James saw during his life, but it’s not the appearance I care about. “Owning one is beyond the means of most wizards and witches, but to possess one with such a historic past is truly something to be proud of. Indeed, this well traveled and heavily used artifact could use a cleaning and a good polishing. It comes to us by way of the estate of my dear friend Nicolas Flamel. This was his personal Pensieve and the memories of one of the greatest minds that ever walked this planet once circled in this Pensieve. I do not lie when I tell you that museums, private collectors, and even a few Ministers have requested this humble piece. His wife, who just so happens to be the maker of this four hundred year old relic and a longtime proponent of bringing back this tournament, did not wish to consign it to such a fate. Her exact words were, ‘It is meant to be used and have a purpose, not gazed upon and allowed to collect dust.’ As someone that has also been described as a bit of an old relic, I could appreciate the meaning of her words.”

Everyone laughs at his joke. I like that Pensieve. I want it. Most of the others around on the podium do too. Six weeks is a tight schedule, especially with two duels and who knows what else waiting for me, but the prize is well worth it. This sounds like a job for a once and future Marauder.

Author Notes – Well, this chapter leapfrogged Turn Me Loose. I couldn't write that one until I had at least gotten the broom race out of my head. By that point, I was like why not just finish the darn chapter? So, I did. So, how did I carry off the concept of a broom race? Thanks for reading. Turn Me Loose chapter 5 is started (finally) and for those of you who are fans of Bungle and Turn Me Loose that are from Russia or Italy, visit the JBern page on fanficauthors because I have two people translating Bungle into those languages. The links can be found there. Thank you both very much. Discussion on FFA and Darklordpotter forums as always.

Chapter 11 – Appearances Can Be Revealing

November 12, 1994

I sit on a stone bench with the Sorting Hat of Hogwarts as my lone companion. The grassy field of the Quidditch pitch lies in front of me. On it are three recently erected dueling platforms and little flags for each competitor. It's a twenty foot path of stone connecting two ten foot wide circles – professional dueling platforms. Throngs of fans continue to fill the stadium as I focus on tuning their noise out. It was something that James Potter worked long and hard at, but Harry Potter could ignore the clamor instinctively.

My mind focuses on the opening spells I'll use, while I stare at the flags marking where each champion will stand. Every professional duelist knows that only your first three to five spells can be scripted. After that, it's a matter of thinking on your feet and reacting to your opponent. On the opposite end of the nearest dueling platform is a blue flag with the name Delacour written in elegant script. Though I would have preferred the first duel be against Krum, I'll settle for taking Fleur down a notch or two.

Engrossed in my own thoughts, I fail to notice the young girl, maybe nine or at most ten standing a few feet from me. "You are Harry Potter." The young girl makes a statement, in French, rather than posing a question.

"Yes I am." I contemplate telling her that I'm Neville Longbottom, but there's no need for me to be cheeky.

"My sister is going to beat you! My sister is going to beat you! My sister is going to beat you! I bet you're scared!"

It's hard not to smile at the singsong, childish taunts of the young girl. "I'm glad you're so certain."

"Fleur's the best and you don't have a chance against her! You're going to lose! You're going to lose!"

“Gabrielle!” Fleur approaches with a stern look on her face. Her short cape flutters in the slight breeze. Fine leathers adorned with the crest of her school cover her body. My leathers are black with the Hogwarts crest and a red cape for Gryffindor. I’m only wearing the red one as a personal favor to Minerva.

“What?” Gabrielle shoots back while rolling her eyes at her older sister for spoiling her fun.

“Do not taunt my opponent. It is both unbecoming and completely unnecessary.”

The Hat, who obviously knows French as well, leaps all over that, trying to rile me up. “Potter, are you going to take that shit from her?”

I shrug. I’ll save the actual malice for Krum. Besides, I know Fleur actually does have a heart beating somewhere under that frosty exterior. “I figured I’d let the results speak for themselves.”

Fleur looks distastefully at the Hat, “Trust the English to make even their tools vulgar.”

“Potter, is it too late for me to change my wager on the outcome? I don’t just believe you’re going to beat her, but I’m beginning to doubt she’ll last more than a minute.”

She snorts derisively and crosses her arms. “I do believe you are mistaken.”

“What? You believe you’ll last more than a minute? Considering Potter is immune to your charm, what makes you think that anything else you have will work?”

“You sound quite certain of your champion, a boy who has three less years of training than I do.”

“Three extra years of subpar French magical training? Do you still have that mandatory first year etiquette class? Oh, that’s a sure winner. At least you’ll know how to lose gracefully! Potter, hit her with

a Belching jinx and see how long she can do it without making a noise. They actually use that as a training technique!”

Oh, now she’s mad. I, on the other hand, remain impressed. The Hat is a remarkably devilish piece of magic. It’s gleaned enough from my mind to make some guesses about what might get under Delacour’s skin the most. Hermione couldn’t wait to bring it back to me after her first “interview” with it.

Glaring at me, Fleur sputters, “It is you, Potter, who won’t last more than a minute!”

“Hey, leave me out of this. You’re the one arguing with a magical hat.”

The Hat is damn near cackling now. Whatever it says next can’t be good. “Potter, did you know that their renowned Charms program not only teaches them how to apply Cleaning and Folding charms, but students can’t pass their first year until they can use them expertly. I’ve always heard that if you can’t get a house-elf, you should hire a French witch for a maid.”

Oh sweet Merlin, the Hat’s trying to get me injured for its own twisted amusement!

“Hat, drop it. Fleur, don’t bother listening to it.” I’m trying to be neutral, but watching the Hat spin her up is downright amusing. I wonder how long before I start to grin? Damn, I think I just did.

“How about that action, Potter? Is it too late to fetch your elf to change my bet?”

“Just let it go, Hat.”

“Well in that case, summon the elf anyway. You could conjure some towels and see if the girl can match your elf in a Domestic charms match? My money is on the elf!”

“You won’t think this is so funny when your wand is in my hand, Harry Potter!”

“Yeah!” Gabrielle joins in.

The Hat just smiles widely almost to its brim, “Well then Miss Delacour, how about a little wager of our own? If he wins, you wear a French maid outfit.”

She smiles viciously. “If I win, the leetle boy spends a day in a Beauxbatons uniform – a female one.”

I protest. “I don’t want any part of this!”

“What’s the matter, Harry Potter? Are you scared? You know you’re going to lose,” The little sprog chimes in.

“Come on, HJ. You’ve been saying how much the ice bitch could use a dose of humility,” the Hat adds. The sister gasps and I can see Fleur bristling. I suspect our duel may be on the verge of beginning early.

Oh, alright, I’ll play. “Okay, but the maid outfit is complete with feather duster, and the winner poses with the loser for pictures.” I’ll send a copy to Sirius in France. Even if I lose, he’ll get a laugh.

“Fine, it is a deal then. Come Gabrielle, it looks like they are ready to start with the first duel.”

I watch Fleur drag her sister away for a moment before looking at the Hat. It answers my unasked question. “You’re fixated on Krum, but you have four duels before him. Get your damn mind off of him and concentrate on your opponents or you will actually get beaten. Plus, I just like to piss on the French every chance I get.”

“Dare I ask why?”

“I’m English. Do I need any other reason?”

Again, I shrug, “No, I suppose not. If I lose, I’m putting a glamour on you to look like a beret for the pictures.”

“If you lose, I’ll never let you hear the end of it.”

Cedric looks a little nervous up on the middle platform with Krum staring up at him trying to play a mental game with him. Could the Bulgarian have been taught a bit of Legilimency? Bagman’s voice is introducing the duelers. I make it a point to clap loudly for Cedric.

Cedric’s strength is probably Transfiguration. Hogwarts is traditionally the strongest school in that art, matching Beauxbatons’ reputation in Charms and Runes and Durmstrang’s vaunted prowess in Dark Arts and Arithmancy. As much as I hate to admit it, Potions is supposedly a strength of the Hogwarts curriculum as well, though in my opinion things have taken a dive since Slughorn retired. Reputation can only do so much.

The referee is a French instructor to prevent bias, or at least minimize it. The crowd goes wild as the opponents bow and begin pacing away from each other. The referee backs out as the ward makers activate the dueling wards to shield the crowd from errant spells. I recognize Bill Weasley checking the set nearest Krum and making some last second adjustments.

Part of the reason for three separate platforms is that the wards can reach saturation and need to be discharged in between matches. Also, the platforms themselves tend to take a beating and often need to be repaired before they can be used again. This isn’t Snape taking out that idiot Lockhart with a single spell.

They spin almost as one, and the crowd drops to near silence. The referee gazes at both of them before shouting, “Begin!”

Neville, Seamus, and Dean have all been given Omnioculars and are seated in different parts of the stadium. Ron’s still being a git and even though I’d bought Ginny a pair, I didn’t plan on asking her to help either. It’s not as good as having a Pensieve, but I should be able to gather some good intelligence on my opponents. I’m letting my helpers keep the Omnioculars at the end of the school year as payment.

Krum immediately opens with a smoky curse that splits into two tendrils. I recognize it as a Pain-Giver. One of the tendrils is disrupted by the long line of rope that Cedric sends straight through it on a trajectory towards Viktor. Diggory dispels the remnants of Viktor's curse while the Bulgarian vanishes the rope. A heavy Bludgeoner pounds on Cedric's shield and nearly breaks through. Krum follows it with two more in rapid succession. Diggory lets his shield eat the last one and easily dodges the other, while conjuring ...a rabbit?

The fleet footed creature takes off at Krum and I wonder what Cedric's game is. Will he Engorge it, Transfigure it, or simply use it as a distraction? His Engorgement misses. Krum's Cutter doesn't. Guess rabbit's feet aren't so lucky after all. Cedric fires off a quick Disarming charm, getting sloppy and shouting the spell. Viktor sidesteps it and hurls a hex I don't recognize. Cedric doesn't either and erects a shield. The spell splatters on the shield. Now I recognize it! Diggory's shield turns dark blue and it fully obscures his view. Viktor immediately follows with a pair of ropes, while Cedric hurriedly drops his shield and trying to clear the blue smoke blocking his view.

He's not moving fast enough. Cedric vanishes one rope and tries to evade the second, but it starts coiling around his leg. Viktor already has two more on their way. It's only a matter of seconds now before the Hufflepuff is overwhelmed.

"Come on, Conjure a gust of wind! It's your only...hope!" Before the sentence is out of my mouth Diggory is already trussed up like a Christmas present. The French referee looks and verifies that Cedric won't be able to continue before declaring Krum the winner. The crowd roars in approval. Viktor leers at me and has to be reminded by the referee to release my fellow Hogwarts student from the ropes constricting him.

He walks back, eliciting increasingly louder cheers from the crowd by repeatedly raising his arms. He walks past me and loudly declares in English, "I have seen the best Hogwarts has to offer. I am unimpressed."

“Keep running that mouth, Krum. I’ll shove those words so far down your throat that you’ll be shitting them for a week.”

“Too bad we can’t use seconds, Potter. You might stand a chance against Delacour’s tiny sister. Then again, maybe not.”

Athena Manos and Aimee Beaucourt are already stepping onto their platform while Bagman’s voice recaps the victory. Bagman’s short summary lasts longer than the duel. The warders are busy dissipating the energy absorbed on the first platform as another walks along it melding stone into the areas damaged during the brief match.

It’s a reversal of roles from the broom race. Manos exudes an air of confidence and Beaucourt now looks uneasy. The Durmstrang witch moves smartly through the formalities. I’m fairly certain that Aimee is already beaten and there hasn’t even been a spell exchanged.

Flitwick barely gets “begin” out of his mouth before Manos’ first spell is on the way. Aimee dives out of the way and sends five little birds out of her wand to harass Athena. A casual swish of Manos’ wand spews a torrent of flame that incinerates the birds as they reach the halfway mark. Cooked fowl, anyone?

Aimee’s Bludgeoner and follow-on Stunner are swatted away with a dueler’s shield surrounding Athena’s non-wand arm. Aimee thinks for a moment that she’s won when her stunner connects with Athena’s hand. That opening allows the witch from Greece to land some kind of vile hex along the French witch’s midriff. Aimee howls and falls to her left, clutching at her stomach, and sending an errant spell that Athena didn’t need to block with her shielded arm, but does anyway.

Give Aimee a little credit. Clearly in pain, she staggers to her feet. The awkward movements actually help her dodge a Banisher and a shot of chain. It’s far easier to Conjure rope than chain. She’s just showing off at this point. Aimee rotates to Vanish the chain, but instead of wrapping it around Aimee, Athena causes the chain to snap like a whip against Beaucourt’s leg. The metal whip draws blood and a yelp of pain from the outclassed girl, who manages to Vanish it on her second attempt.

Athena is taking her time and demonstrating her skill, toying with Beaucourt. She reapplies the Duelist Shield, but only to her hand, and arrogantly gestures to her opponent to attack. Aimee tries elemental Conjunction and tries to pelt her with hailstones, reminding me of my fight with the imposter. Her opponent looks annoyed that she can demonstrate her vastly superior Shielding skills and instead uses a wall of flames to melt the ice balls.

A gust of wind from the Durmstrang student's wand fans the flames higher and obscures Beaucourt's view of her opponent. Athena quickly repositions while beginning a complex casting – a Mirror spell, spawning an illusionary version of herself. When the fire dies, the French witch faces two opponents on the platform moving identically. Aimee throws a Stunner, which both Athenas dodge. Manos uses colorless magic to prevent Aimee from guessing which opponent is real. I know that the one closest to me is the real one, and I have to salute the Greek witch. She actually dodges closer to a Bludgeoner to make it appear that the mirror is the true version.

Aimee buys the deception and ends up being Banished hard into the dueling wards. Athena sends a Pummeling hex at the Beauxbatons girl, catches her wand and sends Aimee right back to the ground. Athena then does several quick steps to mingle with her doppelganger.

Manos doesn't even bother hiding her predatory smile as she completely dominates her opponent. She lands a Confundus charm that has Aimee staring blankly for a moment. Instead of finishing her off, Athena "decorates" Aimee with enlarged teeth and a long moustache before Aimee starts to come out of it. The crowd is screaming its approval. The Disarming charm is almost a relief, but strikes Beaucourt with enough strength to hurl her backwards into the wards again and leave her face down on the stone. Athena summons the wand and looks at it, while Flitwick declares her the winner.

Instead of Banishing the wand back to Aimee, Athena sets it down in the middle of her circle and steps off the platform. This forces Aimee to walk the length of the platform to retrieve her wand and undo the minor hexes. It's often called the "walk of shame" and done by a victor to signify that the loser was an "unworthy" opponent.

“Not exactly good sportsmanship, eh Potter?” The Hat comments.

I agree, “Not really, but I heard she took a lot of shit over how badly she flew, and I think she wanted to make a definitive statement.”

“Odd, the smile on her face makes me think that the bitch enjoys humiliating people. She’s a brawler and likes to dole out punishment. Don’t forget HJ, I’ve been to Durmstrang before and they have an unspoken motto. It translates, ‘You are either Durmstrang, or you are nothing.’ Forget about that now and go win us a bet.”

I start off the bench towards my platform. “How is that different from you and this little bet you suckered Fleur into?”

“I’m not the champion, HJ. You are. I get entertained no matter who wins or loses. That’s the difference.”

Fleur stops along the way to check on Aimee who is already being looked at by Poppy. If the part-Veela didn’t look angry before, she looks furious now. I wait where the circle meets the path until she ascends. Tradition dictates that we approach as one. The Durmstrang wizard officiating this match motions for us to approach.

“Is Aimee okay?”

She hisses back, “Why do you care?”

“Because she was nice to me when I was injured, in case you forgot.” Her expression becomes unreadable for a moment.

She starts to answer, but the leering referee cuts her off. “Enough chatter!” I wonder if he is being affected by her aura. I see a wedding ring on his hand and bet he’s angry at himself. “Are the two of you finished talking, yet? Turn and on my command pace back to you dueling areas. Wands at the ready and cast no spell before I say begin. Do you understand?”

We both nod and he barks the command for us to turn and pace. I reach the center of my circle and spin, wand at the ready. My heartbeat picks up and my eyes lock with hers and I try to read her. Her look tells me she's coming after me fast and furious.

Let her come.

"Begin!"

She leads with Stunners! She really doesn't think I'm worth the time of day. Well let's see what she thinks about this. It's a bit gaudy; normally I'd shoot something like rope or a chain, then Animate it or Transfigure it. "Ursurus Invito!" I bellow the spell to make certain she knows what's coming.

The area around my wand swirls with magic and forms into a decently sized brown bear. The crowd roars in surprise as the bear begins charging down the pathway separating us. The look on Delacour's face is priceless.

Still, she reacts quickly. A burst of flame halts "Brownie" in his tracks, and a powerful Cutting hex finishes him off. She can't savor her victory for long; a trio of animated ropes is already snaking towards her.

Two lengths of rope leave her wand speeding towards me. I respond by Banishing them right back at her. Fleur's immediately turned on the defensive, but skillfully dodges all five ropes and quickly starts to Vanish them. I gesture to one and Transfigure it into a dog – a black grim if you must know. Fleur gives faux Sirius a Blasting curse to the kisser and quickly tries to get rid the dueling area of any other debris left around her.

I give her the fire hose treatment with a powerful stream of water erupting from my wand. She mostly dodges, but in addition to hosing her down, I want it wet and slippery over there. This is a two fold strategy.

My Cone of Frost heads for her as she replies with a Bludgeoner. All that water pooling on her circle turns to ice and she immediately slips

to the ground. I start to dodge the Bludgeoner, but my feet won't move. What the? Shit! Shield! Ow! Didn't block enough of it and took a hit to my left shoulder. I'm stuck to the ground. When did she get off some kind of Sticking charm? Dispel it! What the hell? It doesn't go away. That's a new one.

Crap! What now? She's got her footing back, probably charmed her boots. I toss off a couple of ropes to entertain her and try to figure out what she did to my platform. Heavy Bludgeoners, she must know I'm stuck.

I Conjure a solid shield of thick metal to take her blows, guiding it wandlessly while looking at my feet. My trousers are starting to dissolve! What kind of spell is this? I crystallize my shield to allow me to see what she's doing - rope casting and Transfiguring them into a pair of wolves.

Screw it, worry about the modesty later, or the next clothes I'll be wearing are a Beauxbatons dress. Fleur resumes the flurry of Bludgeoners and my shield intercepts them. The charging wolves need to be dealt with. A Blasting curse disintegrates one in a nasty mess and I bash the other with my metal shield.

Maintaining the Conjunction and guiding it with my hand takes energy, lots of it. I need something quick and dirty. The nasty mess of the two dead wolves turns into a score of rats. The "Pettigrew Horde" James called it. I shoot rubber balls similar to my training with Dobby, except these aren't tennis ball sized. Football sized is more like it.

I'm practically down to my underwear, but I can't let up. She can't regain the upper hand! Between the rats charging her and the flying hunks of rubber, Fleur is completely on the defensive. She uses a Banisher to sweep most of the rodents off the platform, but one of my balls smacks her right in the chin. She stumbles and starts to Banish the ones in the air, but I don't need them. My fast wandwork turns the one that bounces off of her into a big rubber hand. I thrust my left arm out and ball my fist. The Animated hand responds, leaping off the ground and delivering a big rubber haymaker that would have made Dudders envious. She crashes into the wards and bounces off, and then I give her a left cross. There goes her wand! Gesturing for it, she

tries to Summon it back wandlessly, but my construct punches her in the gut and interrupts her Summoning.

Quickly I Summon her wand before she can try again. Catching it in my hand, I Conjure a large cloak and drape it around me as my underwear begins to fall apart. If they aren't going to throw coins, then I'll be damned if they're getting a free show! Looking at the referee, I wait for his signal.

"Winner! Hogwarts!"

Fleur is on her knees, wet, gasping for breath and mad as hell. She vents her rage on one of the rats remaining on the platform. Swatting it away in anger as the Durmstrang referee declares me the winner. I Vanish the remaining rats and send her wand back to her. Not really as much style and flare as I had hoped for a victory, but I'm not complaining – much.

I float Fleur's wand back to her. She wearily plucks it out of the air it and starts off the platform.

"Fleur! Would you mind removing this enchantment?" I shout. My conjured cloak is already starting to develop holes. Is she that much of a sore loser?

"What enchantment? She answers with her own question. The Durmstrang wizard and Fleur both approach.

"Whatever is sticking me to this spot and dissolving my clothing..."

"I did not cast such a charm."

The official sizes up the situation, though I see him looking at Fleur again. "Undo your boots, Herr Potter. I will levitate you out of them." They're mostly falling to pieces anyway, so I comply and the referee gets me out of that tight spot, floating me next to Fleur. The last remnants of my underwear fall to the ground from under my makeshift kilt and immediately dissolve.

I cast a Warming charm, starting to feel a bit strange on a stage with thousands watching and now with only a tattered robe and an equally tattered shirt to cover myself. Karkaroff, Maxime, Dumbledore, and the rest of the judges are already on their way over, while the referee examines my dissolving footwear.

He renders his verdict as everyone, including the other champions and their advisers, surrounds the dueling platform. I'd Summon the Hat, but with something over here dissolving clothing, it's best to leave it where it is. "It is not a charm, nor an enchantment. Note the areas of discoloration; it is a potion that has been applied to the platform. I withdraw my decision on this match until there is an inquiry."

Dumbledore looks mildly angry. "Were I to hazard a guess, the elixir whose effects most closely match these would be the Ichor of Humiliation, once used by Magical folk to strip their Muggle slaves of their dignity. It is a fairly complex brew that is not taught for obvious reasons."

"The question is: who put it there?"

I have my ideas as Fleur immediately protests, "It was not I!"

Dumbledore waves off her protest. "Relax Miss Delacour, I do not believe that you are complicit in this, but I believe we can have our answer soon enough."

I Conjure another robe over top of this one to improve my level of dignity while the Headmaster strides purposefully towards the walls of the arena. With a wave of his wand, six portraits appear. Oh Dumbledore, you sneaky ancient bastard! He's learned from the fiasco with the Goblet of Fire.

"I had nothing to do with this!" Draco Malfoy protests.

“Sadly, I beg to differ. The portraits saw you at dawn this morning standing on the platform marked for Mr. Potter and pouring something out of a decanter.”

“They are lying!” Narcissa Malfoy practically spits out at Dumbledore.

“As much as I’d like to believe in young Mister Malfoy’s innocence, I am forced to accept the word of six portraits of former Hogwarts Headmasters and Headmistresses over the words of a student who by all accounts is quite the rival of Mister Potter.”

Most of the others are now watching interestedly as the Malfoy parents try to weasel their spawn out of this. Karkaroff, however, interrupts. “Albus, my recollection of the rules is that if a student outside of the competition is caught cheating, the school he is from forfeits the event. Mister Potter should forfeit all his future duels; Mister Diggory as well.” Maybe he just wants me out of the way or maybe I’m actually earning a modicum of respect finally. No, he just wants easy victories. Who am I kidding?

The Hat cuts in. “Fortunately, I’ve reacquainted myself with the rules of this tournament after the incident of the broom race.” It looks over at Percy Weasley and Ludo Bagman who are scanning the official book. “Page two seventeen third paragraph, fools! As I was saying, since the duels are scored individually, Potter must forfeit only this duel as a result of the worthless Malfoy’s actions.”

My eyes bore into Draco’s and I see the hint of smug satisfaction in there as the duo of Weasley and Bagman confirms what the Hat said.

Dumbledore nods sagely, “Very well then, Miss Delacour is declared the winner by forfeit. As for Mister Malfoy, your punishment will be decided this evening.”

The Hat laughs, “Not so fast you aging windbag. Turn the page Weasley. Go ahead and read it aloud for the rest of us. They always say that everyone tries to cheat in this tournament, but the rules are quite clear on what happens to those that are caught.”

Percy does as he's told. "To discourage external influence in the tournament there are two levels of punishment. The greater is to be applied when it is determined that the wizard or witch seeks to cheat with willful and malicious intent. If this is the case, the aggrieved party is allowed to select from the following greater punishments, a duel may be used to settle matters with the terms defined by the aggrieved party, expulsion from the school, indentured servitude for a period of three years, or a financial penalty equal to one tenth of the value of the monies and properties of the offending family."

I look at Malfoy, "Seems only fitting you challenged me to a duel in my first year. Now it's my turn."

The pasty faced little worm sneers at me. "Very well, I ... ow!"

Lucius cuffs Draco's head. "Never agree to a duel until the terms are stated! Potter, what are your terms?"

The Hat speaks up slowly, "Potter, listen to me, just like the idiotic magic binding you to compete, these rules predate any Ministry edicts."

Several people murmur realizing the implications. I do as well. "A pretty barbaric thing this tournament, people can die in it. A Death Eater tricked me into it. You were a Death Eater Lucius and I still owe you for what you did to Ginny Weasley. Furthermore, your master took my parents away from me. My terms are no seconds and to the death."

Several appear shocked. Not Dumbledore, he calls for silence and gives me a withering glare. "I believe that Hogwarts itself is the aggrieved party and that the selection of punishments is my domain. What do the rules state, Ludo?"

"It merely states 'aggrieved party' but does not define it as school or champion." It's hard to miss the meaningful look exchanged between Lucius and Bagman. "However, since the champion is a representative of the school, my interpretation is that it is the school." Someone just earned himself a payoff. How is it that the Wizarding

World is full of crooked bastards? They're like effing roaches – everywhere you look!

The Hat argues, “In this instance, with more than one champion from each school, it is the individual and not the school. Had the whelp done Diggory’s platform as well, it would have been an affront to the school. I contend that the punishment is Potter’s to choose.”

“An engaging argument, Hat, and I am pleased that you are vigorously applying yourself on Harry’s behalf, but I think we are all in agreement that any punishment should be handed out objectively and not rashly.”

I look at the Hat, who frowns. “You seem to be in agreement. It will be yet another one of your failings that I can readily remind you of. Very well Dumbledore, make your selection from the Greater Punishments.”

I can see the wheels turning in his head. Putting Draco into an indentured servant status would give him future leverage. Surrendering one tenth of the Malfoy fortune would be equally crippling. Clearly the severity of what has happened is setting in on the little maggot.

“It wasn’t my fault!” Draco wails pointing at Fleur. “She made me do it!”

“What is this nonsense?” Olympe Maxime says with no small amount of ire. I’d love nothing better than for the giant woman to squish that little worm.

“She’s so beautiful. Ever since she arrived, I’ve been trying to figure out a way to get close to her. I’d do anything for her. She’s an angel. It’s like she cast a spell over me.”

Maybe Draco isn’t an idiot after all? Being easily influenced worked for his father once. I snarl, “Give it up Malfoy. You’re grasping at straws.”

Lucius seizes it, "No, clearly my son was not willful in this. The girl's natural aura is to blame."

Fleur looks disgusted. "This boy has never been within ten feet of me."

Narcissa shakes her head, "Are you certain young witch? You have been at the school for over a month now. How many young wizards have sought you out in this time? More than you can recall, I assume."

I speak up, "Quit trying to turn this on her, you worthless Death Eaters. You seriously expect us to believe this? That potion takes days to brew. The opponents weren't even announced until yesterday. Nice try with the 'my child is a weak minded fool just like I was' defense, but it doesn't hold water."

Snape butts in as usual. "Draco did you take this potion from my storeroom? Headmaster, after the duels had finished, I planned to report that someone had been rifling through the shelves again."

"Careful Snape, every time you involve yourself in the affairs of a Potter, you come out the loser. Yet you keep trying anyway. Must be poor breeding..."

Snape's death gaze at the Hat is truly something to behold. Sadly, he gave Draco a lifeline and the little shit grabs on with both hands. "I'm sorry sir, it's just I couldn't resist her."

Lucius smiles, "Mr. Bagman, what are the lesser punishments?"

Hat laughs, "Be careful what you wish for Lucius. It could be the head of the family will be beaten by his own house elf in a fight, unless, of course that's already happened, hasn't it, Malfoy?"

Lucius reddens at the insult, but fails to react. Dumbledore cautions the Hat to be civil or he will have it removed from the proceedings.

Bagman defers to Weasley, who has already been reading with his trademark fanaticism. "It says that the lesser punishments are

actually decided by the Goblet of Fire. Each lesser punishment is written on a piece of parchment and the guilty party touches the Goblet of Fire, in front of all assembled, and it pronounces judgment. The punishments are a six month period of serfdom, public surrender of the aggressor's wand which may be kept as a trophy or ransomed back for a sum of money no greater than one thousand galleons ...” Percy's voice trails off and he looks at the book trying to discern the meaning.

“What are the rest, Mr. Weasley?” Dumbledore queries.

Percy's struggles to get the words out, “The last two are Flogging - stripped to the waist and given ten lashes by the aggrieved party or something called ‘The Cur's Mark.’ It is also to be delivered by the aggrieved party. I'm not certain what a Cur's Mark is.”

Neither does anyone else apparently. There's a moment or two of confused glances.

Finally, Hat educates everyone. “They haven't been used since the 1500's. You morons amaze me, agreeing to the rules of a tournament that hasn't been waged in four hundred years and not thinking to update the rules of the contest! A ‘Cur's Mark’ is a branding to the back of the wand hand so that every time the witch or wizard casts a spell they will have to stare at their shame and dishonor.”

It's pretty cruel actually. Personally, I'm torn between the flogging and the branding. Here's hoping the Goblet has a sense of justice.

“My son will not be whipped or branded like some common farm animal!” Narcissa practically screams.

The Hat winks at me as if to say, ‘Please let me field this one.’ It cackles, “Considering there are at least three people within the sound of my voice that have experienced a ‘branding’ of sorts, including your husband, pray tell: what is your objection, Lady Malfoy?” How the Hat manages to convey so much sarcasm in addressing her is particularly amusing. “Complain all you wish, regardless, it is up to the Goblet to judge your pathetic crotch droppings.”

Wow! Even for someone “used” to the Hat, that was a bit rough. Narcissa’s hand goes towards her wand, but so does mine, Dumbledore’s and Flitwick’s. She quickly rethinks her position as I step deliberately in front of the Hat. Her eyes tell a story of barely contained rage. Funny, I’d always thought Lucius was the least common denominator in the Draco equation – learn something new every day.

Dumbledore wisely takes charge. “That will be enough! Contain yourself, Hat! We have delayed the proceedings long enough. The guilty party has been discovered and the method for determining the punishment established.”

He pauses to make certain that he has everyone’s attention before continuing. “The Goblet shall be brought forth tomorrow evening after the first round of dueling is complete. Mister Malfoy, you will give your wand to Professor Snape until that time and will return to the castle now. You are confined to your common room until further notice. Mister Potter, take your ... advisor and go to the medical tent, now. A new set of garments will be brought to you immediately. The second round of dueling will begin as soon as the platforms are repaired, inspected, and deemed ready for use.”

He spins away leaving no room for disagreement leaving most everyone else slack-jawed. Say what you will, but the man has a presence.

I scoop up the Hat and head for Poppy and the tent. Hat is quiet for the first ten paces. “I need you to brew a cauldron of Fireproofing draught, HJ. I’ve forgotten how temperamental adult flesh bags are. I have a very effective recipe memorized. If you are too busy with your own preparations ask the Granger girl.”

“I take it that’s not the first time someone’s wanted to destroy you?”

It remarks casually, “There’ve been many. The first was none other than Helga Hufflepuff.”

“May I ask why?”

“Who do you think told her Godric was diddling both her sisters? Daft bitch took the news rather poorly.”

Author's Notes - Okay, here's the deal. I have an original novel to finish. If I want this novel to be on sale by this summer, it means I have to finish it. I'm about 35 thousand words shy of where I need to be and I am going to take the next 4-6 weeks off to do nothing but work on Dead Eye.

The good news is that this chapter was split in two. This means Lie 12 is essentially done. I will be able to post Lie 12 in the next 7-10 days and not distract from my goal of completing the first draft of Dead Eye. So, Lie 12 in a week or so and Turn Me Loose Chapter 6 in six weeks. I also have a couple of shorts and one shots I may release during this hiatus, but I won't make any

Disclaimer – No matter how good it is, it's still just a piece of fanfiction, but I hope you enjoy it just the same.

Acknowledgements – Thanks as always to the folks on Alpha Fight Club for helping me through the scenes. My betas ZanyMuggle, Aaran St. Vines, and Sparky40sw also deserve a round of thanks for overcoming the real life obstacles and getting this back to me. Finally, Garrett PI and RJ Stone2 get some kudos for lending their insight to this chapter.

Chapter 12 – What's the Price of Your Fame?

November 12th, 1994

"Is that offer to go easy on me still open?" Cedric asks half-jokingly as we approach on the platform. I missed the other two duels from this round, waiting for my garments, but Viktor disposed of Aimee in less than thirty seconds, but that's not the match I really want to watch. From the sounds of the crowd, the duel between Fleur and Athena was noteworthy. Athena won for the second time and Fleur is visibly limping and fuming, but from Bagman's commentary it sounds like she gave the Durmstrang witch a run for her money.

I look at the French referee before smiling. "I went easy on Fleur, so why not?"

Cedric chuckles, "That's your version of easy? Seriously, where'd you learn those spells?"

"Let's just say that people trying to kill me is a wonderful motivational tool. Duel well, Diggory."

"Same to you, Potter."

I spin and set up inside my circle. No discoloration this time. I'll be free to move. How should I open?

"Begin!"

A geyser of water leaves my wand. Cedric freezes it three quarters of the way to him and Animates it, sending the ball of ice rolling my way. I send a Cutter through it, slicing it in two. His wand work transfigures one half into a whitish looking retriever. I take the other half and my white grim pounces on it, dragging both of them off platform onto the ground below.

He sends a quick Stunner my way hoping that the growling and thrashing distracts me. Years of sleeping in the same dormitory as Ron Weasley, Sirius Black, and Remus Lupin have inoculated me to whimpers, growls and snores of all types. I return fire with my best annoyed look and a Bird Conjuration. Unlike Aimee, I stagger their flight path instead of sending them en masse at my opponent. For good measure, I Engorge one of them from canary to falcon size.

I'd expected the Fire Defense. It works well enough against most animal Summonings. Cedric goes another route – a wide area Bludgeoner, which knocks all but the largest bird out of the air. A Cutter clips those wings and the two canines have some fresh meat to fight over as well.

Launching a ground assault, I Conjure another Pettigrew horde. Altering the plan, I immediately Banish the lot at him. Most overshoot and end up rebounding off the wards and onto the ground, but the few that land on the platform should distract him for a moment.

He conjures a rope, but charms it to act like a whip, snapping at the rats and knocking them away one by one. Not a bad little active defense against all the animals I'm using. Guess I'll have to come up with something that doesn't mind being whipped. I suppose it would be a foul if I summoned Draco from the stands. I'll need a moment for this particular spell. It takes both energy and time.

Cedric sends a range of minor jinxes at me: Tripping, Slug Vomit, and Fumblefingers. It's almost tempting to take the Slug-Vomiting hex; it would provide me with base material for Transfiguring, and he'd be shocked as hell that I could fight through it. I dodge anyway, focusing on not missing the wand movements.

However, I've had enough embarrassment for the morning and Slug Vomiting is notorious for killing an appetite. Besides, I have all the base material I'll need. We're standing on it. I'm not allowed to use his circle, but the pathway and my circle are permissible.

"Golem Mobilis!" Anyone doubting me after this, bugger off! The middle of the platform rises up into a misshapen humanoid figure that starts ambling towards Cedric. It's slow, but sturdy. Cedric hurls a Reductor at it and seeing how ineffective it is, moves right up to Blasting curses. He Transfigures his rope whip into a chain and tries to trip it. The monster slogs right through it snapping the links.

Seconds later, it's over. My golem looks worse for wear, but the remaining arm that Cedric didn't blow off has Cedric's wrist firmly in hand. I focus on making certain that it doesn't crush bone, while keeping his wand pointed away from me.

"Do you yield?" I shout.

Cedric grimaces and then nods, "I yield."

My golem lets go and starts heading back to the area I brought it from as the referee declares me the winner. Cedric massages his bruised arm, but gives me a nod. Only then do I let my ears hear the wild howling of the crowd. I give Cedric a quick wand salute before hopping off the stage. My eyes find Krum and I smile. I'm coming for you and your little witch friend as well.

"That was really impressive out there, Harry." Ginny Weasley says to me. She's standing next to the door to my dorm. I'd just come from the groups of well-wishers and their pleas for tutoring in the common room. Neville is with me and has all three Omnioculars. I intend to watch the Delacour and Manos match and catch a quick rest.

"Thanks."

"Don't you want to know why I'm here?"

"I figure you're going to tell me anyway. Neville, mind giving us a minute?"

"Sure thing Harry. I'll catch up to you later." He hands me the Omnis and turns back downstairs to join Colin and Dennis – my other "kid brothers."

"Okay, talk."

"I want to apologize for the way I've been treating you."

I could be mean and say that I hadn't noticed. That'd really drive her spare. To the Hat I think, "Damn, you're starting to rub off on me!"

"My new calling is being a role model to students everywhere, starting with you. Are you going to answer the bitch?"

"Okay. Apology accepted."

"That's it?" She seems surprised.

"HJ, picture her mother naked. That's what her future husband has to look forward to!"

"Thanks for the visual, Hat." "Apologies are just words. They mean nothing without actions. The truth of the matter is that you and I were never dating."

"I know that!" She says a little defensively.

"You're right HJ, odds are she'll never get the huge breasts Prewitt had, but if she starts humping anything that moves, she can have the reputation."

"Do I really need to hear that right now, or ever for that matter!" To Ginny, I shake my head, "I'm not sure you do. You were bent out of shape when I told Michael Corner that he should ask you out. The bloke seemed really into you. If you feel I've led you on or given you the impression that something was happening with us, I'm sorry, but that's just the way it is." I shrug.

She refuses to look me in the eye. “You’re... you’re right. I probably was reading too much into it. Anyway, I just wanted to say I’m sorry and warn you to be on the lookout for the twins. I think I put a stop to them for now, but it’s only a matter of time.”

I arch an eyebrow. “What were they up to this time?”

“I caught them speaking with Bill. He was giving them recommendations for bypassing the wards around your bed. Actually, they weren’t really going to bypass them. Bill was describing a technique to disrupt the keying mechanism that detects who is allowed through the wards. It only lasts for a few hours, but it would have turned your own wards on you. I’m not certain, but they may have already done it.” A wave of my wand confirms that the keying runes have been mangled. I’d only used a simple key rather than a complex one I hadn’t planned on their soliciting outside help.

“Looks like you’re right. Judging from my Diagnostics spell, the runes comprising the keying mechanism are damaged. What did you tell them, Ginny?”

She looks a little uncomfortable, “Well, to be perfectly honest, I thought you were going to get beaten rather soundly today and didn’t deserve more people having a go at you, but after what you did to the French witch and Diggory. I’m reasonably certain you’d beat the snot out of them.”

“I know what you’re thinking HJ, but here’s some practical advice; you already have enough real enemies without picking a fight with a Curse Breaker. Think she was in it from the beginning and is only having a change of heart now that you’ve shown what you can do?”

“Fine, put Bill’s name on the deferred arse-kicking list. I’ll fit him in down the road. The twins however are long overdue. Ginny? I’ll take her at her word. She might be jealous to the point of being delusional, but her biggest fear was coming back to Hogwarts after the incident in the Chamber.”

“And they said?”

"They started to act like it'd be a challenge, but I pointed out that their main reason was because the way you treated me and Katie." I notice that she strains a bit to say Katie, but that's neither here nor there. "Either way, she mended fences with you. I should do the same, and if they want to continue being childish gits, they can't hide behind the excuse of avenging their little sister's pride."

"I give her points for speaking her mind."

"You still don't know witches that well do you HJ? She's still competing with Bell hoping you're going to date her."

"Do yourself a favor and don't get caught up in it. Now, if you'll excuse me, I'm going to fix my wards and grab a spot of rest. I still have one more duel."

Ginny smiles at the peace offering. "I wouldn't worry about it Harry. That other French witch is no match for you. If you ever need anything, let me know."

"Ginny, are you any good with Potions?"

"Not bad. I'm better with Charms and Hexes."

"The Sorting Hat here needs to be dipped in a Fireproofing draught. I was going to ask Hermione if she wouldn't mind making it, but I just remembered how busy she is with the team competition. If you really want to help, you can start there."

"What are you up to, Potter?"

"Just taking a page out of Diggory's playbook. He's got all of Hufflepuff helping him. No reason that I shouldn't start making my life a bit easier. I'm stuck as a teenager for the next few years. Since, I'm not going anywhere and they're not going to leave me be, I should try to be a bit nicer. Plus Ginny offered. Is the brew that difficult?"

"Not particularly. Very well, HJ. I'm positively quivering with excitement to see the mind of a fourteen year old witch. There should

be enough idiotic romantic fantasies in there to make me sick. I'll be sure to look for the ones involving you."

She is both excited and confused. "Sure, why does the Sorting Hat need to be fireproofed?"

I hand it to Ginny and smile. "Spend some more time with it and decide for yourself."

"Are you feeling better, Aimee?" Fleur asks.

Beaucourt grunts and I hear the sound of hand smacking water. "Not really. The Hogwarts nurse demanded Athena remove the enchantment, but the spell takes two days to wear off. It causes stomach cramps...ugh. Like that one! Right after Potter defeated me, she was shoving a pain reliever in my hand. It takes the edge off, but I can't take one within two hours of tomorrow's duels. What is it?"

Fleur hisses, "Something crossed the ward line!" She sees my Animagus form and relaxes. "Oh, it is you. Aimee, Gabrielle, allow me to introduce the most intelligent creature in England. I have discovered that it is called a Pronghorn."

Her little sister is excited, "Oh! It's pretty. Does it talk?"

"No."

"But you said it is the smartest in all of England."

Aimee laughs before grunting again. "She said that because it doesn't talk, Gabby!"

Fleur laughs as well, "Plus it understands French, showing that it knows a civilized tongue."

Okay, I'm not really spying. I've already fought both of them. I'm only here out of professional curiosity. Unfortunately, all of them are wearing swimsuits. Of course, it would be a bit disturbing if the

preteen was skinny dipping, so I'll take the good with the bad. I allow them to inspect me and Fleur checks my formerly wounded leg/arm and congratulates me on healing so quickly.

I'd finished off Aimee in my last duel of the day quickly. My Conjured grim pounced on her and started licking her face. I hope Colin caught it with his camera. That's definitely going to Sirius by way of the Flamel estate. She has the lasting injuries, but Fleur is sporting several blemishes on her otherwise dazzling physique – tokens of her run in with Athena Manos. Cedric did a passable job against Fleur for a minute or so, but with his focus directly on her, I think her aura began to cloud his mind after the first few exchanges, and she easily beat him.

Using my hoof, I gesture at the nasty bruise on her thigh. "Yes, both Aimee and I have had our own problems, my friend. We should be better in a few days; do not worry."

They talk to me for a few minutes before I move over and nibble at the berries on bushes to try and fade into the background. Nothing to be learned if they're fawning all over me.

The last duel of the day was Manos versus Krum. Neither held back and Manos once again proved why Karkaroff selected her. She has the talent. I get her tomorrow before Krum. Honestly, I don't know which one I'm looking forward to more at this point. I need to switch tactics for tomorrow. Manos will be expecting lots of ropes, water, and Transfiguration. I'll work more Charms into the mix more tomorrow and shake things up a bit. There just might be one or two questionable spells in my repertoire for someone who likes dealing out pain and humiliation. There's a good chance she'll be doing the same thing and I expect Victor's spells to be a shade or two darker.

"I just can't wait to see Harry Potter wearing a female dress uniform!" Gabby exclaims. The youth is rather aptly named if you want my opinion.

It's enough to shake Aimee out of her discomfort. "What?"

“They made a bet and Fleur won. He has to dress up like a Beauxbatons student...a girl student!”

Fleur looks visibly upset. “Gabrielle! I have no intentions of holding him to that arrangement. It would be shameful for me to do so. He will likely insist that he is still the winner regardless.”

“They made you the winner!”

“Only because one of his schoolmates is a lying, cheating, dog of an Englishman! What you don’t understand is that he couldn’t move and he still beat me...handily.”

Aimee interjects, “You lasted longer than I did against him and I’m pretty sure he went easy on me. His damn Transfigured dog was drooling all over me! Could you have stopped that thing he created against Diggory?”

“Perhaps, but then again maybe not. Diggory’s curses were aimed at the torso. I would have tried to take out its legs, but this is conjecture on my part. I wasn’t prepared for what he did during our duel. I likely would have been even more shocked at the earth elemental. Regardless, we won’t have to answer that until the second wand duel, which is months away. Harry Potter is now the problem of those thugs from Durmstrang.”

I came out here hoping to see a little skin and what do you know – I finally got some respect.

Beaucourt continues massaging at her side, “Speaking on behalf of my own aches and pains, I hope he beats them soundly. I wonder, what is the history between him and this Draco Malfoy? I thought the challenge of a duel to the death was made solely to shame the boy and his parents, but Potter looked ready to go through with it.”

“All the more reason not to anger him. He is obviously both powerful and quick to anger. Even his Headmaster and Professors seem to have difficulties with him. Only that vile Hat he carries around commands his respect. I suggest we avoid Harry Potter.”

Respect just became fear that I'm a homicidal psychopath. Oh well, isn't there's the old saying about it being better to be feared than respected? Great! Now, I'm thinking like a Dark Lord.

Aimee senses the need for a conversation change, "Why don't we talk about something else, say for instance the identity of that red haired gentleman I saw speaking to you?"

Gabrielle sounds a bit petulant. "I still think you should make him wear the clothes."

Fleur shrugs tossing her hair over her shoulder. "That is enough, Gabrielle. We are French and that means we should not sink to their level." Turning to Aimee she explains, "His name is William Weasley and he is a Curse Breaker."

"A little older than your usual fare, but he looked tasty enough."

"I suppose. It was refreshing to be able to hold a conversation with someone capable of resisting me. He was a perfect gentleman."

Bill? A perfect gentleman? Those are words not often used together. According to the stories Ron and the twins told about him last year, he's anything but. Wheels turn in my head, but I do believe I have a way to enact a little vengeance.

"He asked that barring injury, I come have a drink with him in Hogsmeade after the duels tomorrow."

"You could probably leave halfway through our duel and still beat me." Aimee offers sadly.

"Duelling is not your forte, Aimee. There will be other events. I look forward to seeing your solution to the Puzzle Room."

"I'm making lots of friends!" Gabby announces out of the blue. "The first year Ravensclaws let me go to some of their classes with them! The want me to ask Papa if I can come here when I turn eleven. Do you think he'd let me?"

"A Delacour not going to Beauxbatons, ridiculous! You'll need to be close to friends and family as you get older."

"No, I don't!"

"Yes, you do."

This goes on for a solid thirty seconds and Fleur is clearly becoming irate. How do people with younger siblings put up with it?

"For the last time! Yes, you do! We've been through this before!"

The younger Delacour snaps back, "Just because all your friends stopped liking you doesn't mean it's going to happen to me! Maybe my friends are real friends!"

Fleur looks slightly hurt, but tries to sound consoling, "Do not get your hopes up. You'll need to prepare for it eventually."

"Quit saying that! It's not true! I might not even develop an aura!" Little Gabby is having a full blown meltdown.

The older Delacour gives no quarter. "Every female in our family has developed the aura! There is no reason to think that you will be an exception. You need to quit deluding yourself!"

Her little sister starts crying and the moment turns horribly awkward. Fleur looks torn as Aimee gestures, "Come here, Gabby." The little girl continues crying as Aimee pulls her into a protective hug and helps her out of the pool. A Drying spell, followed by a Switching spell and both Beaucourt and the younger Delacour sister are dried and dressed with their wet swimsuits in hand. Although, from the amount of tears coming from the little girl, Aimee might need a second Drying charm soon.

"I'll take Gabby back. Why don't you stay and calm yourself, Fleur?"

"Gabrielle, I am sorry. I have had a long day and did not mean to snap at you. Forgive me."

“S’okay...” She mumbles as Aimee leads her away. Gabby clearly idolizes everything about Fleur. I’d probably get a similar result if I treated Colin and his kid brother that way. I step in front of Gabby and let her wrap her arms around my neck. Aimee pats me on my head and takes her out of the grotto.

There’s a minute or two of silence and I strongly consider following them. Fleur’s voice stops me there’s a few tears running down her cheeks as well. “You think I am too hard on her, as well? Please do not judge me, Monsieur Pronghorn. I was just like her when I was her age, before my aura surfaced. Everyone was my friend and playmate, fun and laughter were all that I saw.”

She pauses, clearly remembering something painful and for the first time I’m somewhat ashamed that I came out here. “Mama tried to prepare me as best she could for the cold reality. I did not understand then, but I do now. It was hard to watch all my friends turn against me. The boys, they wanted to play new games with me, games I was not ready to play. As for the girls, they all became jealous and hateful, even Aimee for a time. It will happen to her in two maybe three years at the most. Perhaps in five years, she will forgive me like I forgave Mama. The stronger she is now, the less it will hurt in the future.”

This used to be the downside of being a Marauder. Every once in awhile, running around the castle in the invisibility cloak, following the map, and getting ready for their next big prank, they’d run into the ugliness of real life. Things like girlfriends begging a bloke not to break up with them, or blazing rows between best friends or enemies. Hell there was even one fucking idiot JP found one night sitting there cutting himself with a straight razor and healing the cut with his wand before doing it again – all because the pressures of NEWTs were getting to him! Even Snivellus wasn’t that much of a loser!

Teenagers, effing lunatics, the whole bloody lot of them! The worst part is I’m stuck being one of them again! Merlin preserve what’s left of my sanity.

Still, I found myself next to Fleur and she did the same thing her sister did, burying her head into my fur and bawling her eyes out. A few moments go by and she composes herself. “Thank you for

listening to me and withholding judgment. I must leave now and apologize again to Gabrielle.”

I have to leave as well. Near Hagrid’s hut I can collect enough fresh shit for some of my spider Transfigurations. I’ll send two, but not for their pillows. They’ll be on a search and detonate mission. Their target? The twins stash of dungbombs. The sixth year boy’s dorm will smell like a sewer when I’m done with it, they’ll be out of dungbombs, and everyone will assume that they accidentally set off their stash.

“Yes Professor? You requested my presence.” McGonagall summoned me to her office again.

“Come in, Potter. Sit.”

I comply. JP was good at reading her. She’s angry, but trying to hide it. “First, I would like to commend you on your surprising performance today. The level of power and skill both you and Mr. Diggory demonstrated have the Wireless buzzing about our Transfiguration program.”

“Thank you, Professor.”

“I have received no less than two dozen congratulatory messages from my peers in the field, as well as three requests for speaking engagements. Furthermore, a gentleman claiming to represent the Board of Governors for a smaller school in Portugal approached me with an offer to interview for their upcoming vacancy as Headmistress.”

“That is impressive. Congratulations. It’d be a shame to lose you.”

“I can take credit for Mr. Diggory’s performance, but I cannot in good faith claim to have had a hand in yours. I was hoping for an explanation. Exactly how long have you been holding back on me?”

“I’ve already had this conversation with the Headmaster. My encounter with the horde of dementors broke something loose in me.

Obviously, I have more power available to me, and I spent the majority of the summer in study. In the past few months, I've realized that there are people who want to see me injured or dead. Moody was brought here for extra security and we both know all too well how that turned out."

"Regardless, some of the spells you were performing, especially the Golem spell, are both well outside of the curriculum and dangerous if used improperly."

"That doesn't pose a problem, since I used them properly."

"True, but you seemed quite ready to kill Draco Malfoy in a duel. Headmaster Dumbledore is also highly disappointed with your behavior after the boy's transgression was revealed."

"I doubted Lucius would let him accept my terms, but yes, I was. Tell me, do you honestly think the world is a better place with him in it?"

"Potter!"

I ignore her outrage. "As for the Headmaster, if he wants to express his displeasure with me, let him do it himself. I'll match him disappointment for disappointment and still come out ahead by a mile. Had he been more vigilant, I would not be in this mess to begin with! Alastor Moody was supposed to be a close personal friend of his, yet the imposter operated here for two months. So when you speak with him, be certain to convey my opinions of his performance! Consider this – you are angry at what I could do. I am angry at what he cannot do!"

She reigns in the outburst that was about to leave her lips. Massaging her forehead, she speaks slowly. "It is understandable that you are angry. My concern that very anger; combined with the level of power you demonstrate, could result in the serious injury of another student."

"I can control myself. Now, you know why I was so adamant about being removed from Snape's class. Even today, he rushed to the

boy's defense almost as quickly as the Malfoys. Tell me, did you happen to look up the potion Draco used?"

"No, I did not feel it necessary."

"I did feel it was necessary. In addition to the obvious effects, this potion has a moderate to high flammability index. Had I Conjured flame, which I guarantee I can do. It could have been enough to either detonate the concoction or set it all on fire. Again, you take me to task on what I could do, but is anyone lecturing Malfoy at the moment? If his head of house is, I'll guarantee you Snape's complaint is that Draco got caught."

"It is not my place to speculate on Professor Snape's methods. That is not the issue here. I believe whatever punishment the Goblet selects will be a sufficient deterrent for future actions."

"I'd like to think so too, but we'll see. Let's just hope Dumbledore can keep it from being tampered with – again."

She taps her fist against her desk several times and looks very pensive. Finally, she smiles at me. "Thank you for coming by, Potter. This situation is equally frustrating for myself and I apologize if I have done nothing more than add to your own irritation. Time and again, you have given me cause to trust in your actions and I would be remiss if I did not."

There's something you don't see everyday, someone apologizing for not believing in me!

McGonagall continues, "Since, there is no immediate solution to this quandary, we should proceed cautiously. Understand that I will be paying closer attention to you, for your safety as well as our students and visitors. At the same time, I want you to understand that my door is always open to you. My obligation to the welfare of all the students in this castle most assuredly covers you as well."

"I'll keep that in mind."

“Please do so. Though you have proven that you are capable of solving your own problems, should you have difficulties with the student body, I encourage you to bring them to me. I will do my best to resolve any future ones to the best of my ability.”

Standing to leave, I smile at her. It's a nice offer and in the future, I may take her up on it. The twins have irked me for far too long and it's time for them to pay the price. If she gets the job in Portugal, I'll have to ask if they take transfers. I'm beginning to think I need a change of venue.

All I have to do is get through this year first.

Oddly enough, I was in the Infirmary catching up on things with Poppy when the first Gryffindors arrived. Professor McGonagall had directed them here to sleep for the night because the stench in the Tower was unbearable. How many dungbombs did the twins have up there? It's an odd happenstance that all my valuables are packed neatly in my trunk and it is sealed with an Airtight charm. Hermione might have also had the importance of this impressed upon her.

I was placed in charge of sending the males to the Prefect's bath first and keeping the stench from the females from permeating the ward. Naturally, Fred and George were missing. They were being given a crash course in mastering the Bubblehead charm and were heading up the cleanup effort.

A freshly scrubbed Lee Jordan filled in everyone on the harsh language McGonagall used upon discovering their stash of Filibuster Fireworks and now ruined potions ingredients. I felt better knowing that I'd given her an outlet for that frustration she'd been feeling earlier.

My enemies' ability to wage mayhem has been crippled. I'd heard they'd lost a lot of their money at the World Cup and my performance during the duels had cost them dearly, several students bet on me as a long shot during the first round. I chuckle internally, don't I sound like a budding little Dark Lord Potter? When Minerva's through with

them something tells me Molly and Arthur will want their pound of flesh as well.

Deprived of money, raw material, and from the sounds of it, the ability to go to Hogsmeade until after Christmas, they have been successfully marginalized. My cheeks hurt slightly from holding back the smile. Plus, if it becomes common knowledge that they were bested at their own game, they'll lose the mantle of "pranksters supreme."

Lee continues, "I heard that McGonagall was so mad that she's not even going to let the House Elves help. The portraits, the carpet, the furniture – everything has to be cleaned. It's probably going to take several days!"

Ginny's eyes are lock with mine. She'd been away brewing the Fireproofing draught and missed the detonation. The Hat is on a table, drying in the back of the Infirmary and cackling. A proclamation from her could finger me and reverse a good bit of the ill-will now directed at Fred and George. What's she going to do? Here's your first test of how much you want to be my friend.

She opens her mouth, "They've been buying the cheapest stuff they can for years. I've been telling them it's going to catch up to them one day, but do they listen to me? Not bloody likely!" Smart girl, she knows I could have done a lot worse. I resume watching the pictures in the Omnioculars of Athena Manos, my next opponent.

The door opens and instead of another group of smelly Gryffindors, I see Fleur Delacour enter. She immediately scowls at the smell.

"May I help you, Fleur? Does Aimee need another Pain Reliever?" I use French to minimize eavesdropping. I knew from my earlier "spying" that Aimee would likely need more and just so happen to have a few fresh ones brewed up.

"Yes, but what happened here?"

"Someone had a large stash of Dungbombs detonate. The entire Gryffindor tower is being cleaned."

Fleur rolls her eyes. "This level of foolishness would not be tolerated at Beauxbatons."

I pull a pair of potions off the shelf for her and walk with her out of the infirmary and away from prying ears. "Probably not. Speaking of foolishness, where would you like me to show up so that I may discharge this bet of ours? Simply name the time and place. Here. These are freshly brewed and should be at peak potency. I hope they help."

She is surprised that I did not claim victory and a bit off balance. "Forget about the bet. It is nothing and I refuse to hold you to the terms. As I said at the broom race, a forfeit is a hollow victory at best. I will accept the point in the overall standings, but I do not take pride in my performance. I should be apologizing to you for letting your advisor goad me into the wager."

"The Hat is a handful, crass, vulgar and obscene with the mindset of tenth century Europe."

She gives me a puzzled look, "Why do you put up with it?"

"It is the finest creation of a very powerful wizard. Its antics amuse me and most importantly, it has almost a thousand years of knowledge to draw from."

There's a moment of silence while she digests what I just said. I smile and continue, "For what it is worth, I'm sorry that Malfoy avoided the greater punishments by dragging your name into it. You don't deserve that. He's just another of my enemies trying to take a pot shot at me."

Her expression softens, "Does this happen often?"

I search for the right words, but my French just isn't that good, so I switch to English. "It's the price we pay for who we are. For you, it's bloke after bloke falling all over themselves to be the one standing by your side, along with the icy glares and whispers of the jealous females. In my case, it's everyone wants to build themselves up by

tearing me down; be it some Death Eaters trying to avenge their master or a little maggot student like Malfoy with delusions of grandeur. If they can be better than the boy who defeated a Dark Lord, then they must be something special too, or I never deserved to be special in the first place.”

My words have a noticeable effect on her. “You have a firm grasp of reality, Harry Potter. I wish you luck in the duels tomorrow.”

“You can always help by softening up Krum for me.” I don’t need her help, but it’s a nice way to wish her luck.

She actually gives me a smile. “If I am able... Yesterday, I assumed none of you would be a match for me. Now, let us say I have a more respect for my competition. I would not be lying if I said that both Aimee and I would like to see the witch from Durmstrang soundly defeated.”

“I will push her to her limits. If she can keep up, she deserves to win. If not, the day is mine.” I feel a tap on my shoulder. “Hello, Hermione. You’ve met Fleur haven’t you?” She’s right on time.

“Not really, but you did very well out there today. I was particularly impressed with the wide array of Charms you used in the third match.”

“Thank you. I only wish they had been more effective against my opponent.” Fleur responds graciously.

“Tomorrow after the duels, Hermione and I are headed into Hogsmeade, I intend to invite Cedric as well. Would you and Aimee be interested in joining us?”

“I will ask Aimee for you, but I am afraid I have other plans.”

I scratch my chin. “Oh, some other time then...”

Hermione looks slightly uncomfortable. “Your plans? They aren’t with Bill Weasley are they? I noticed he was talking to you after the match.”

I mumble something unintelligible. Fleur looks at me, "What if they are?"

Shaking my head I gesture to Hermione. "I'm not really one to say, all my information is second hand, but Hermione spent a few weeks at the Weasley home this summer. Didn't you?"

Hermione nods, "Maybe he was just boasting for his brothers, but he's a bit of a self-styled Casanova. In the two weeks I spent there before the term started, he brought three different girls there for dinner."

I pat Hermione on the back, "I don't want to hear any of these stories again. Ron goes on about him enough as it is. Either way, I'd better get back to the ward. Madam Pomfrey may need me with so many people milling about in there. Fleur, if you change your mind, the offer stands. If not, tell Aimee we'll be happy to have her."

I head off, confident that Hermione will relay enough juicy gossip to damage Bill's chances with Fleur. There are plenty of ways to get revenge that don't require any spell casting. Hopefully, Bill learns his lesson - not to dabble in my affairs again.

"I'm surprised you were so willing to help out." Hermione meets up with me about thirty minutes later in one of the empty classrooms a floor below the ward. I had to get away from the chaos up there. I feel bad for Poppy, but not that bad.

Hermione doesn't even bother looking up from my Anybook. Ah, the taste of the forbidden fruits from the tomes safely resting in the Potter Vault. The offer of only slightly restricted access to my hidden repository of knowledge was the price of her participation. I could go switch some books out, but I'll be brewing and enchanting for the next few weeks – might as well share the wealth. Plus, I have a sneaking suspicion that if it were the choice between saving a priceless book and her cat; she could always get another cat.

“You shouldn’t be, Harry. I didn’t tell her anything that I hadn’t seen or heard with my own eyes and ears. Factor in that he was trying to help the twins vandalize your belongings at a time when you most certainly don’t need any of that nonsense, and I have no issues with serving up my opinion of that pompous womanizer...bollocks, now that’s a spell! Can you use that one tomorrow?”

I look over her shoulder, chuckling at her use of language. “I could, but it’s a borderline spell. Most would consider it Dark Arts. Krum or Manos could use it, but I don’t need to feed the rumors. I don’t mind people seeing me as powerful, but I can ill afford to start using questionable spells.”

“I’m just disappointed that the encounter with the dementors didn’t trigger something in me. Honestly, I’m a bit jealous,” She said. She gets the same half-truth that I’d fed McGonagall and Dumbledore. I can tell that Hermione knows there’s more to it, but is content to allow me to cherry pick the information I feed her.

“I think you’re plenty powerful as it is, Hermione.”

That earns a smile, but she still refuses to lift her eyes from the book. “Well thank you. So, what else do you have in this wonderful book?”

I show her how to switch between tomes. “Probably nothing you’d be interested in: Dueling, Warding, Advanced Transfiguration, Conjuraton, Principles of Enchanting, Alchemy Made Easy, the Potter Family Copy of the NEWT written exams...”

“What!”

“Oh come on, almost all the old families have a copy. They never change them.”

“Harry!” The poor girl’s eyes bulge from their socket.

It’s too much, I have to laugh, “Oh, I can’t believe you just fell for that! Just kidding, I saw your eyes glazing over and figured I’d check to see if you were still with me.” It’s a joke I’ve used before, sort of. JP used it on Lily in their seventh year when she asked him why he

wasn't taking the pending exams more seriously. It was either use that, or yet another pun off of Padfoot's name. After seven years all the good ones had been over used. The white lie had a remarkably similar infuriating effect on Evans.

"If you didn't have a duel tomorrow, I would so hex you..." Ironically, Lily did hex James.

"Insufferable know it all!"

"Arrogant glory seeking prat!"

Both of us dissolve into a well-deserved fit of laughter. That's probably something I miss the most from good old Harry's life. He was young, dumb, and painfully naïve, but at least he had a lot of laughs. I'm suddenly an old soul who made Gryffindor tower unbearable more out of necessity rather than a juvenile whim. That said I've about reached my limit. Whatever the Goblet of Fire does to Draco, well let's just say it'll be in addition to what I plan for him.

After a minute, Hermione snorts, "Thanks Harry, I haven't laughed like that in a long time."

"I needed it too. Anything you want to go through?"

"Well..."

"I do need to rest for tomorrow, so keep it reasonable, no rituals."

My friend tries to look disappointed, but fails humorously. "Not even one? Okay how about these two? I really want to see how you do this one, no wonder you didn't seem terribly interested in the Protego."

What a difference a day can make! Yesterday, people looked at me like I was a lamb headed to the slaughter. On the way out to the platform today people are telling me to give it to Manos and Krum good. The fickle winds of fortune switch change direction yet again.

Even Ron managed a kind word or two. He must think that's a sufficient apology for being a git.

JP would have mocked him. HP probably would have accepted it. HJ, well I guess I'll wait and see. Right now, I've got some work to do.

Athena Manos is a rather attractive witch. Her complexion is that olive tone giving her a perpetually tanned look and coppery coils of hair that fall onto her shoulders. Here I'd thought most Greek girls were brunettes. My guess is either a Nordic mum, or liberal use of hair coloring potions. Athena's the kind of witch that looks great now, but I could see that the appearance she cultivates will require more and more effort as she ages.

The scowl on her face somewhat detracts from her overall appeal. "I hope you have something more impressive than yesterday, Potter. That might work for novices, but I am anything but. Do not think, for one moment, that I have forgotten what you did to me during the broom race."

Oddly, I had forgotten all about sending her into the lake. "Do you intend to bore me into submission with words, Athena? Don't flatter yourself. You're just an obstacle on my way to Krum."

The French judge cuts short our posturing and orders us turn and begin pacing. Several paces later with Bagman's voice booming about the anticipation building up to this match, we face each other again. I bring my wand to the ready and wait for the signal.

"Begin!"

I should ask Hermione if she still doesn't believe in Divination. Manos leads with the spell that my friend suggested I use last night – "The Black Shocker" – a bolt of obsidian energy, races towards me. At least, she's not holding back. It's a professional spell; fast, difficult to evade and even with most shields you'll still feel like you were just hit with a mild stinger. Not shielding it is generally considered a bad idea, unless I want to twitch a lot for the next few hours.

“Magus Contego!” I focus on the shape of my shield, making it as tight as I can. The pillar of energy in front of me scatters her attack and I don’t feel a damn thing. How about a professional shield for her professional spell? It only seems fair. Let’s see what she tries next.

“Dementia!” She switches to Mind Altering magic. I dodge and allow it to splatter into the wards behind me leaving a colorful scar on the magical barrier. I snap off three minor hexes so fast that she has no choice but to Blanket Shield as I seize the initiative.

It’s time to see how well she can Vanish. Instead of balls, I send flat rubber discs flying at her. The smaller profile makes them more difficult to intercept. On the fifth disc, I switch to porcelain, then to bone and back to rubber. It’d be nice to use metal, but metal discs would likely draw a warning from the official.

She’s good and quite fast at Vanishing. Changing the composition doesn’t seem to faze her too much either. I could send another burst, but I don’t want to waste too much energy. Assuming neither of us is going to make a stupid mistake, this might take awhile.

Athena sends a pair of nuisance spells of her own my way, trying to gauge my reactions and then uses an Obscuring spell causing her to periodically shimmer out of focus for a few seconds at a time. It’s a serviceable spell that’ll last for the next few minutes and make her harder to target.

We exchange spells for another thirty seconds or so. I draw the first real “hit” by borrowing Cedric’s wide area Bludgeoner. She opts to take the equivalent of a smack across the face to finish the spell she was casting.

A blinding flash of light followed by a thunderclap rips through the air. One of my eyes was already closing when I saw the wand movements – a flashbang maneuver. I roll forward as two quick hexes pass to either side of me and Conjure a snake. My left hand hits the snake with a wandless Banisher. No time to wait for it to slither down the pathway. Get it there now! Athena’s already cast her Mirror spell with both of her images still blurring slightly, but immediately finds herself dealing with a serpent in her midst.

I vary the Bird Summoning charm. Instead of five canaries, I send about a dozen finches her way. With too many targets to Vanish, she has to abandon her illusion and one of them sends a slashing tendril of flame through the air to destroy the tiny birds.

As she casts, I send a quick burst of water striking the remnants of the fire and creating steam. Things should feel hot, sticky and uncomfortable over there for a second. Will that hairdo stand up to sudden humidity? Inquiring minds want to know. She quickly uses a gust of wind to blow it towards me and quickly follows with a second "Black Shocker." I dodge, though I wince slightly. As the spell passed nearby, the moisture laden air bled some of the energy into me – clever move on her part.

I retaliate with a heavy Bludgeoner that reverberates against the wards as she narrowly evades. Conjuring a grim, I send Sirius off to the slaughter. Athena doesn't disappoint. Her overpowered Blasting curse destroys my dog and a large chunk of the platform. She probably wrecked the platform and creating a small chasm to try to inhibit future Summonings on my part. She adds a Banisher sending loose chunks of stone at me at high velocity.

I Vanish them with impunity and no small amount of anger, as the judge calls out. "Time! Warning Durmstrang!" Obviously, he judges the maneuver as having the potential to seriously injure. Boos and jeers rain down from the crowd. Shouts of, "let 'em fight!" can be heard. The masses don't like their entertainment interrupted. Manos looks incensed and comments about the Bludgeoner I'd just used and how much injury it could have done had it landed. He ignores her and gestures for us to move to the centers of our respective circles. After a third warning, she's disqualified.

I try to look more winded than I actually am. Let her think she's wearing me down. "Wands at the ready! Begin!"

I send a pair of Stunners almost as a taunt. She smacks them away with a Dueler's shield around her non-wand hand and summons a Stun Whip in reply – even I'm impressed. It's a Stunner contained within a stream of energy. Moody, the real one, loves these. JP had

seen Dumbledore incapacitate five people in just a matter of seconds with this critter. The downside - it's a real power sink, ranking right up there with my Golem spell from yesterday. This duel has already hit the four minute mark and in several areas the wards are glowing trying to dissipate the energy.

I dodge the first two snaps of the whip and Blanket Shield the third. Come on you bitch, burn through your reserves. I send weak spells in reply that she swats away with the Dueling Shield, advancing towards the edge of her circle. I give ground letting her sense victory. Just a little closer ... now!

I drop a Dueller's Shield of my own on my left arm. My hand darts out and snatches that whip like it's a golden snitch. I'll have to look at the Omni's later to see the look on her face. It should be the look of someone who just realized that she'd been had. Yanking as hard as possible, I pull her forward and hold that whip right against the wards.

It's called "grounding;" forcing an opponent to waste a large chunk of power in the wards. My shield holds as the sizzle of energy creates a near blinding white patch in the air next to me. One of the warders races over to adjust the arrangement of ward stones. She releases her focus and the whip fades, but the damage is two-fold. In addition to the drain, Athena is on her knees a good three feet onto the walkway – sucker!

"Time! Warning Durmstrang! Outside of circle! Second warning!"

She takes her time standing and brushing off her robes. I know what she's doing, she's trying to stall and recover. The French official is savvy enough to spot it as well. He instructs her to immediately return to the center of her circle.

"Wands at the ready! Begin!"

It's time to finish this! Instead of the disks, I switch to the larger rubber balls. Frankly, I want her to Vanish these. The witch is all ready on her last legs and I fully intend to end it here. Desperately, she tries to interrupt my spell casting with her own, but it costs her. She takes hits from two of the rubber balls and stumbles around her area drunkenly.

Quickly, I change one of the balls into a metal chain and wrap it around her. Athena tries to dispel it, and half succeeds, but I add a second chain just as fast.

Collapsing in a heap and writhing against the chains, she sends a Stunner my way hoping to snatch victory from the jaws of defeat. I swat it away like an annoying insect and hoist her feet first into the air like a hunter's trophy.

Maybe, there's a slight vendetta on the judge's part, for the witch's treatment of both Fleur and Aimee, but he takes a bit longer than one would expect to declare me the winner.

"Durmstrang unable to continue! Winner! Hogwarts!" I lower her to the ground. Part of me wants to just dissipate the chains and let her drop like a sack onto the ground, but she isn't an enemy like Krum; Athena's just a competitor.

Executing a quick bow to her, I jump off the platform. The duel took a good deal out of me, but she's good and beaten. Athena expected no one to be able to match her skill and power. She was wrong. Cedric is her final opponent. I walk straight to him.

"Harry that was one hell of a duel!" He claps me on my shoulders. I nod to both him and his advisor.

Professor Sinistra laughs, "Harry, previously I thought you'd need an agent to maximize your Quidditch career. I'm beginning to believe you'll need an agent for that, broom racing, and dueling. Well done indeed."

I thump Cedric on both his shoulders and command his attention. "Listen, she's got nothing left – no air under her broom. Keep an eye on her and make sure she doesn't try and slip a rejuvenation draught while they fix the platforms. If you want to beat her, go at her hard and fast and don't let up. If she gets the advantage, take it right back. I'm guessing she won't be able to go more than a minute if you keep up the pace. Pound her relentlessly and she'll crack!"

“Sounds ruthless, Harry.” Cedric says and then smiles, “I like it! What about you? Krum’s bound to try the same thing with you.”

I grin wolfishly. “Let him come. She might be down and out and after five straight minutes of dueling and everyone must think the same thing about me that you two do. No fourteen year old could possibly have anything left after that, but I’m not just any fourteen year old, am I?”

Yeah, I’m a bit fired up. Maybe it’s just the adrenaline talking. For the better part of three years, I’d been trying my best and largely failing to be accepted as just another student. No more, I’m through with that. People want their legend; I’ll give them their bloody legend!

I spare no words for Krum, only an icy glare. He can interpret it as me conserving energy or however he wants. I don’t care. There are only one or two people in this stadium that I don’t think I can take in a straight up duel and Viktor Krum isn’t one of them.

“Wands at the ready! Begin!”

Viktor launches a furious barrage of Concussion hexes. I weather it behind my Mage Shield. Pouring energy into it, I stand like a lighthouse taking a pounding from the North Atlantic in February. His attack subsides and Krum realizes that I am not nearly as weak as he had hoped.

Time to go South American Rope caster on him, nets and bolos. I shoot a heavy net high and immediately switch to bolos waist and leg level. Tying him up alone isn’t satisfying enough. He needs a good pummeling! I mix in a few bludgeoners and test his dodging skills. Krum moves with a speed someone of his build shouldn’t have and Firewhips a gap in my net, while dodging the bolos and bludgeoners. He Banishes chunks of smoldering net in my direction.

A wave of holly and phoenix feather and the remains of the net morph into a large Ravenclaw Eagle that spins and goes onto an attack vector.

Viktor disintegrates Rowena's mascot and hurls a Pain Giver towards me. My Reflective Shield sends it back towards him and I Conjure a pair of Helga's badgers. Krum grimaces and uses an Immolation spell combined with a Fire Friend charm to wash his entire circle in flames. Krum walks unfazed through the ankle high flames licking at his boots. My badgers are reluctant to proceed closer. Fine, some Gryffindor bravery then. Gesturing, the two badgers merge and swell into a lion. It takes a follow on compulsion, but the lion charges ahead, heedless of the flames. Krum's Bonebreaker ends its leap in midflight.

I use the Water charm again, aiming for his fire. Steam rises into the air and he casts a burst of light in response, trying to obscure my vision as well. Let's see if I can shock him. Despite my general opinion, let's not exclude Salazar's house. Instead of Conjuring and Banishing a Slytherin Mascot, I go the route of illusion. My illusionary snake is roughly twenty foot long. Viktor clears the smoke with a large wolf now protecting him and sees my monster.

On some level, he must know it's an illusion, but his body is already reacting. It's the distraction I need. I tap my left arm while my serpent rises to strike letting Viktor's Firewhip pass through it. I send a thin stream of energy easily missed in all the chaos.

Viktor sends his wolf sprinting towards me through the phantasm when his left arm snatches the wand from his grasp and tosses it off the platform. My Switching spell worked! I punch him in the jaw with my hand while he's still trying to process what just happened. Quickly, I send a stinger through his arm, thrashing around on my shoulder and apply a Stasis to it; preventing him from doing anything to me in response.

I Firewhip through both the approaching creature, while Krum struggles with my "renegade" arm. Wincing in pain, I realize he just broke my wrist, but it's only a token gesture, and easily enough repaired. I'm already Summoning his wand to me. He drops to his knees and shoves my arm into the fire. The rest of him is protected by the fire friend Charm. My poor arm isn't. Okay, that hurts! The wand falls and rolls towards me, but I stagger to it. His weak

wandless summoner starts to move the wand, but my booted foot steps on it. A wave of my wand dispels the flames around Krum.

Viktor's eyes display an unexpected level of malevolence. He doesn't like being beaten. Before he can do anything else to my limb, I switch our arms back as the French official declares my victory. Applying a Numbing charm to it, I follow with a Diagnostic Charm and survey the damage.

"Winner! Hogwarts! Please return Durmstrang's wand."

I look down at the wand and am tempted to try and snap it with my boot heel. The fire stunt was unnecessary but still barely within the rules of Tournament, just the way he operates. Instead I Conjure ice around it and fashion it into a replica of the Quidditch World cup. I send the mock trophy floating back to him as he scowls at me. I'm sure he doesn't like coming in second here any more than he liked it there, except he can't blame it on his teammates. This is all on him.

My "trophy presentation" earns me a half-hearted caution from the same French judge, but I can tell even he appreciates a good insult.

Poppy scowls at my arm in the medical tent, "Only you could do this much damage to yourself in a victory!" The pleasant buzz of the Pain Relieving draught is setting in, and my arm smells more like a collection of medicinal creams instead of cooked chicken. I think I'll have fish in Hogsmeade this afternoon.

"I'd have faked an injury anyway. I'd rather be in here with you than outside with the masses."

She gives me a thin smile. "You did well out there, Harry. You were reckless, foolish and painfully idiotic, but simply amazing nonetheless. I'm almost beginning to wish you'd just stick to playing Quidditch. I'd thought I'd seen everything, but a Switching spell during a duel..." She trails off before finishing, "Now, keep it in a sling for the rest of the day and I'm Charming the sling to tell me if you take it off for anything other than a shower."

"It wouldn't have worked if I hadn't sold him on the illusion." We stop to listen to Bagman's commentary. Cedric just beat the already winded Athena and the cheers of the Hogwarts faithful surge through the air. Tough loss there Durmstrang, and you're supposed to be the Dueling school.

I step out of the tent after thanking Poppy again, only to find another form of torture waiting for me. "Diggory owes his victory to you, Harry. He's no match for her." Rita's silky smooth voice wafts through the air as she falls into step beside me.

"Hello Ms. Skeeter." I wondered how long she'd been waiting for me.

"So tell me Harry, why the ice trophy treatment for Krum. Payback for his cheap shot in the broom race, or his stunt with your arm attached? There's a delicious little rivalry brewing here. Care to add a little fuel to the fire?"

"He reapeth what he hath sown, Rita. If there is any underestimating next time, it'll be me underestimating him. That's all that needs to be said."

"Oh that's a juicy one. So how's the arm, Harry? Nothing to worry about I hope?"

"A little burnt and a bit worse for wear, but I'll be fine in a day or so. Next question."

Rita purses her lips. "Now, mind you, it hasn't been that long since I attended this fine school and my memory might be failing me, but I don't recall Firewhips, illusionary snakes, and lion Transfigurations on the fourth year curriculum. So where'd a powerful little heartbreaker like you come across that assorted nastiness? My readers are already in a tizzy after yesterday. Today will only add to the debate."

Might as well spread the kudos around, "Oh it's easy, when you have the smartest witch in a generation as a best friend, or teachers like McGonagall and Flitwick. With hard work and the support of good friends and teachers, a Hogwarts education is tough to beat."

“Oh, if that doesn’t sound like brochure propaganda, I’ve never heard it! Any comment regarding Dumbledore’s announcing that Francois Gauron from Beauxbatons will be filling the post of Defense Against the Dark Arts instructor for the rest of the term?”

“I must have missed that announcement. Is he the referee from my last two matches?”

“Yes.”

It’s a small world after all. “Well, I wish him luck and look forward to seeing him in class.” Of course, I’d be liberally using the “champions can skive off class to train” perk and had been out of class more often than in, lately.

“Impressions of your competitors?”

“Which one first?”

“Krum naturally.”

I’m tempted to fake a Bulgarian accent, but I know that’s not what she’s looking for. I’ll stay away from insulting him further. “He’s a fierce competitor, who doesn’t like to lose. I intend to help him get accustomed to the feeling, as often as possible.”

“Manos?”

“She fought very well. The duel could have gone either way.”

“Gracious. You’re not trying to make an enemy out of the entire Durmstrang contingent I see. Diggory?”

“A good, decent bloke. Everything someone from Helga’s house should be. I suspect he’s going to be a terror with a staff in his hands.”

“Delacour?”

“She’s in first place in the overall competition for a reason, but there are more events to come.”

“Finally, Beaucourt?”

“She’s not a duelist, just like Manos wasn’t a broom racer. That means she has other talents I haven’t seen yet. All five of them have their strengths. They were chosen either by the Goblet or by their instructors. I have to be better if I want to win.”

“Now, your opinion of Draco Malfoy and the punishment ceremony this evening? Were it not for his interference, you’d have been a perfect five and oh in this round of dueling. You reportedly challenged him to a duel to the death immediately afterwards.”

I pause. Rita really wants to make something out of this. “The challenge was legal according to the archaic rules of this tournament. Mostly, it was to stifle his blustering. He is nothing, and he more than deserves any punishment the Goblet hands out tonight, but it’s not his fault really.”

“And whose fault would it be?”

“In my opinion, his parents, they clearly have been too focused on climbing up the social ladder than doing any actual parenting. While they were constantly in your society section, who was rearing their child? No one from the looks of things. It’s a classic case of a spoiled child acting out for attention that he clearly doesn’t receive at home. He seems to have this delusion that we are arch rivals. When the reality is he’s just a nuisance. Frankly, if it were a choice of being raised by my Muggle relations or the Malfoys, I’d choose the Muggles.”

“Oh, that’ll sting. Are you sure you want me to print that?”

“Every word, Rita. I make no secret of my dislike for so-called repentant Death Eaters. That dislike extends to my former Potion’s Instructor, who apparently keeps distasteful potions readily available, like the one that the admitted thief stole from the storeroom. Frankly, I’m beginning to wonder why he bothers to lock the storeroom at all,

since he obviously has no interest in securing its contents. Perhaps it's time the Board of Governor's looks into the matter and how this supposedly professional educator conducts himself?"

Rita laughs a long predatory chuckle, "Aren't you just a little spitfire today; any other knives you'd like to hurl? Dumbledore? The rest of your housemates who censured you?"

I shrug my shoulders, "No, I'm done for now, but the day is still young. You may want to check back later."

"Sum it up for me, Harry. Two events and two times you have been the recipient of either questionable tactics or outright foul play. Any concerns going forward?"

"I'd be lying if I said there weren't."

Madame Rosmerta gives me a free fish lunch and my table a round of butterbeers for lunch. I guess I'm officially "abusing my celebrity" now. I learn that Aimee doesn't really like butterbeer, preferring actual wine with her meal, but Gabby Delacour greedily takes the extra one. Aimee is Gabrielle's "other sister," and since Fleur kept her date with Bill anyway, we get the eight year old as a consolation prize. The rest of my group consists of a couple of Aimee's friends, Cedric, Cho Chang, Cho's friend Marietta, a couple of other Puff's, Roger Davies, Hermione, Neville and the Turpin sisters.

We'd been talking about the duels ad nauseum, and quite frankly I was getting tired of it. Directing my attention to Hermione and the two Heads, I ask, "So, are you ready to do Hogwarts proud next week at the first Knowledge Bowl?"

Roger looks excited. "I think we match up well. Might be a letdown for the crowd after the duels and what not, but we're going to do our level best."

"Well, I'll be rooting you on."

“Thanks Harry. I appreciate that, of course with a pair of overachievers like Mindy and Hermione here, we’re in good shape.”

Hermione blushes furiously while Melinda smacks Roger and tells her to quit calling her Mindy – must be a story behind that. A minute or two later, Roger and Melinda excuse themselves to go wander the town in their Head capacity, with Melinda reminding me about the Apparition classes next weekend. Their spots are immediately filled by Susan Bones and Hannah Abbott.

“Congratulations on your wins, Harry! You too, Cedric!” Hannah says practically spitting the words out. Cedric gives me one of those, “I warned you, didn’t I?” looks about the fourth year girls in his house idolizing me.

“Thanks. Say, what’s that you’re wearing there Susan?” Bones looks down and realizes that she’d been wearing one of Draco’s little “Support Diggory/Potter Stinks” badges. I hadn’t really paid them any mind up until now.

Susan is beet red and at a loss for words. “I, uh, err...”

“Can I see it?”

Flustered, she practically rips it off her robes. I size it up and run a Diagnostics charm over it. Gabby, sees it and laughs when it switches to “Potter Stinks”. I can see the runes below doing the message. A wand wave rearranges the runes and it alters to “Potter is a Troll.” That really gets the table roaring.

“What do you want it to say?” Aimee asks. It confirms my theory from Fleur’s “Secret Garden” that Beaucourt is a budding enchantress.

I lean in and whisper it to her. She looks confused and makes me spell it for her. Aimee’s wand moves swiftly over it. Tiny runes rearrange themselves and the writing changes to “Who is Sarah Underhill?”

Ignoring the initial questions, I think hard looking in my mind for the right charm. It’s on the tip of my tongue. Ah, that’s the one! “Any of

you guys got another one of these?" Marietta, one of Cedric's friends, and a suddenly bashful Hannah pull theirs out. I push a lot of energy into Susan's badge, while reciting the Replication chant under my breath. Aimee and Hermione next to me shift a little, feeling the force I'm pushing into it.

Seconds later, the writing on the other three also say, "Who is Sarah Underhill?"

Smiling, I hand it back to Susan. "Do me a favor and wear it. Whenever you get within a few feet of another badge for the next few days, it'll change them too. Just leave my name out of it."

She looks suitably confused. "Sure, Harry. But who is Sarah Underhill?"

"That's the thousand galleon question. The answer's out there." Snape's days at Hogwarts are numbered and I'm starting the countdown. I'll get the Sorting Hat to help me draft my formal complaint to the Board of Governors about "Professor" Snape having that potion on hand. If there is anyone who knows the right "language" to properly convey my opinion, it's the Hat.

"Let the accused come forth!" Dumbledore's voice commands. "Upon its arrival from the Ministry, Madame Maxime, Headmaster Karkaroff, and two members of the Ministry of magic have all verified that the Goblet has not been tampered with."

Draco Malfoy approaches the Goblet of Fire, lacking his usual swagger, the public display of fear is almost as good as whatever punishment is handed out. He tosses the strips of parchment written by his own hand into the basin and the Goblet roars to life.

I heard a rumor that some of the Slytherins tried to mount a campaign for a Censure vote of their own, but if it happened, it appears to have failed. The rumor itself is damaging enough to the little golden boy. According to that same rumor, it was Snape who put a stop to such

talk. Lucius is a cold emotionless mask, but his wife is barely contained fury.

The Headmaster speaks solemnly, “Draco Malfoy. Place your hand on the side of the Goblet and it will judge the severity of your transgression.”

There’s nothing but silence in the air as we wait with baited breath. The flames change and a single wad of paper is spit out like a projectile towards Dumbledore. He unfurls it and reads the writing.

“It seems the Goblet wishes to make a statement to deter any future attempts to influence the tournament. It has selected, The Mark of the Cur as Mister Malfoy’s punishment.”

Over the angry denials of both Malfoy parents Hat muses to me, “Fitting wouldn’t you say, HJ. He’s always been envious of your scar. Now, he gets one of his own. Do you want to ask to be the one to administer it? We can make a solid case.”

“Let me think it over, Hat. It’s tempting, but my interview with Rita tried to marginalize the little shit. If I do it, it’ll look more like a personal vendetta. Personally, I’d want to see Lucius have to do it.”

“Better still, that deranged bitch he’s married to.”

“Good one, Hat! Now, we need to start thinking more about the Puzzle Room. I need that Pensieve.”

“What do you have in mind, HJ?”

“Well, picture this...”

Author’s notes – Well, it took a few days longer than I’d hoped to get this one ready, but I hope it was worth the wait. HJ delivered a bit of payback in this one and laid the ground work for more to come. As always, discussion of this story can be found on Darklordpotter and Fanfiction authors forums. Like I stated in the previous chapter, I’ll be on

hiatus for the next 4 to 6 weeks to finish the first draft of my original coauthored novel, Dead Eye. When I come back it will be with Turn Me Loose Chapter 6.

Disclaimer – Just another piece of fanfiction

Disclaimer – This is just another piece of fan fiction, but hopefully a memorable piece of fan fiction.

Acknowledgements – Special thanks to Mordecai for the education on Ancient Runes. Garrett PI gets credit for the Sorting Hat's song in this chapter. As always the support of Alpha Fight Club greatly improves this story. My three betas are ZanyMuggle, Sparky40KW, and Aaran St. Vines. Any mistakes they didn't catch are all mine.

Chapter 13 – Caged Fear

November 13th, 1994

I resist the urge to clap at Draco's punishment. Somehow, I manage this amidst the stifled mutterings from all the people crowding the Great Hall and the wails of denial emanating from Narcissa Malfoy. She's already foaming at the mouth.

The Hat chortles in my mind. "Save your plans for beating the puzzle room, HJ. It's been a long time since I've watched a branding and I want to savor the moment."

"Here I thought you were supposed to be nice, Hat. Didn't peg you for a Malfoy hater."

"I couldn't care less about the little shit or his misbegotten bloodline! I want to see pain and suffering! I want to watch Dumbledore's face as he tries to figure out where he went wrong with the boy. I want to memorize every detail so the next time that aging fossil makes some inane statement about human kindness I can remind him about the day everyone watched one of his students get branded! It never fails to amaze me how savage you miserable bastards can be to each other. Frankly, I'm surprised that your race ever managed to walk upright – let alone create something as glorious as myself."

Laughing almost aloud, I reply, "On behalf of the human race, I have to take offense to that. Besides, you need to tell me how you really feel about Dumbledore."

People are looking around, some wondering just exactly how this whole branding is supposed to work. Thanks to the Sorting Hat, I already know. It's partly why I have such a stupid grin on my face. I'm too far away to see the runes swirling on the surface of the chalice, but I know that in the center will be two runes. The first is Raidho, which symbolizes Right and Order – a symbol of justice. The second is Thurisaz, but in a reversed position implying that the enemy was attacked with malicious and less than honorable intent. The irony is that the two runes together have an almost lightning bolt look to them. Congratulations, Malfoy, you get your own distinctive little mark, except for the fact that it will remind everyone of me.

Maybe the Goblet has a sense of humor? "Hat, have you ever spoken with the Goblet of Fire? Is it alive like you? Is it just as miserable?"

"It's never spoken. It shot an occasional wad of parchment at me over the years, but I don't really have the hands to read them now do I?"

"That'd put a strain in any relationship."

"Still, I believe it was created originally as an artifact to render judgment back in the days when you ignorant fucks believed that magic itself could not be corrupted and was a pure force."

"I bet that lasted about as long as it took for the first person to put a Confundus charm on it. Look at it this way, if it is fully aware, it must be more miserable than you are. The last time that thing has been out was centuries ago."

Either way, I can appreciate the irony in Draco finally getting his, but wait it gets better...

"It's starting, HJ, look at the Goblet."

The two runes begin to glow like sunlight is being reflected off of them. Unfortunately for Draco, the sun has already set. "How's that for 'Instant Karma' there, Hat? No appeals. No buying off Ministry officials. Justice done right on the spot – no waiting."

“Looks like he’s electing to do it himself! Must be his father’s idea to make him look like something resembling a man.”

It’s somewhat reassuring to see the uncaring thing that passes for justice in the magical world turn on someone else. “My poor baby! No!” Narcissa whines and gets to her feet. Two Ministry officials stop her, but it looks like she was going for her wand. Given how she wanted to destroy my buddy here, it didn’t seem like she has the proper appreciation for magical artifacts.

In the grand scheme of things Draco is just a little gnat, an annoyance. He might have been some kind of archrival to Harry Potter, but I’m not that wet behind the ears soul anymore. Hell, maybe I never was.

Lucius hands his panicked son something to bite down on. He is no doubt telling the little ponce that Malfoy men do not scream like little girls. Narcissa is being physically restrained by the two Ministry officials. Sweet Merlin, I hope they took her wand from her or this might turn violent. Someone else should see this – someone with his own personal ax to grind against ickle Draco.

“Dobby!” I whisper under my breath and wait for the pop.

“Master Harry...” I slap my hand over his mouth to shut him up. A few people sitting near me are momentarily distracted by his appearance.

“Just be quiet and watch. I’m guessing Draco was never very nice to you, was he?”

The little psychopath nods very slowly with his overly large eyes fixated on the scene. With a muffled cry Draco thrusts the back of his wand hand against the side of the Goblet and he yelps in pain. There’s a brief flash of light and he thrown backwards clutching his hand and looking more pathetic than after the Buckbeak incident last year.

A voice from the front row calls out, “Oi, he’s pissed himself!” Colin just earned himself a few galleons. I was almost certain he wouldn’t do it, but he’s in Godric’s house for a reason.

From the corner of my eye, I see a scary smile on Dobby's face.

"Master Draco always says Dobby is not a good elf. Dobby needs to punish himself. How long can Dobby hold his hands in the fire today? Now who is the bad one?" The elf mutters under his breath with a slight cackle.

I'm not ashamed to admit it – that elf frightens me sometimes. It makes me really glad that I'm his employer.

--

"I wonder if it smelled like burnt chicken."

"Wasn't close enough to tell, Padfoot," I respond looking into the mirror. Through the cracks in my curtains I can see Dean and Seamus actually studying for a change. Relaxing in protected silence behind the wards surrounding my bed, I take this opportunity to catch up with the only man known to escape from Azkaban ... at least that's what the public thinks. I happen to know better.

"And you said Cissy was in a right state?"

"She looked ready to kill someone."

"Well, she was always very possessive of her 'toys'. Then again after all those years of being a show bitch, Cissy might not be right in the head."

"That's saying something considering where you've been! You look better than last week. How's France treating you?"

"No complaints here. Especially with the set of legs attached to Widow Flamel's attending Mediwitch."

I shake my head. "Reverting to baser instincts already, Black? You must be on the road to recovery."

He smiles a predatory grin at me. "Not reverting...reverted. Not sure if I'm up to juggling the Mediwitch and the personal secretary, but I think my time in Azkaban has earned me the right to try. "

"Playing the wrongfully convicted fugitive from justice already to carve a couple of notches in your holster? I don't really need to hear this."

"Why HJ? Technically, you're a rich, famous, somewhat handsome, fourteen year old in a school full of hormonal little witches. I'm surprised you even have time to speak to me."

"Give me a break, Sirius. The only ones worth considering are the seventh years. The only seventh years that would go to bed with a fourteen year old are the ones that I definitely need to stay the hell away from."

His face contorts in barely controlled laughter, "What's the matter there kiddo? Afraid you can't handle a few gold diggers? If they'll spread their legs for your fame, it still means that they'll spread their legs."

"Crude, but I just don't need that hassle right now. Maybe you don't remember how clingy some of them can be. Do I need to recount some of my newly surfaced memories of witches stalking you?" I do my best teenaged Sirius voice, "Guys, Glenda Hoffman just won't leave me alone. If I start acting stupid around her check me for potions..."

"Girl was a tad obsessive – decent enough shag, but the bad far outweighed the good."

"I seem to recall that was the end of your quantity over quality phase."

"How many times have I told you? It was the beginning of quantity of quality. Damn, it's still weird to be talking to you just like you're James! You'd think after all these years being around magic and seeing some bizarre things that I wouldn't be surprised ... sorry HJ. I didn't mean for that to come out like that."

I shrug. "I stopped worrying about it after awhile. Hat's been good about reminding me not to dwell on what I can't change." Wisely, I decide to change the subject before the somewhat festive atmosphere takes a nosedive. "So, from your reports concerning recent and future conquests, I'm guessing you're getting back into shape."

"It's coming back, but I've got months to go before I'm back in top form. Next week, I have a dueling coach coming in to start working with me."

"Have you made contact with anyone yet?"

He purses his lips together. "Not yet. I'm still waiting for the word to filter out to the bounty hunters and Hitwizards that might still be out looking for me. After the winter holidays, I'll start putting out some feelers and trying to get in touch with a few hired wands."

Sirius must see something in my face that he doesn't like. "Do you know something I don't?"

"No, I don't have anything definite, but with his people starting to act again and whatever that bastard replacing Moody was doing, I can't afford to be too complacent."

"I understand. This dueling coach I've got coming in. She's bound to have some contacts as well."

"She?"

"Naturally. She's a distant cousin of Emmy Vance. If she looks anything like Emmy, I'll let you know when I add her to the old rotation."

There's nothing else to say, "You really are a dog, Sirius."

He retorts, "Not just any old dog, the leader of the pack, my boy! Well, better let you go there, HJ. If I'm lucky there'll be a knock on my door in about thirty minutes so I should get cleaned up."

“... and if you’re not lucky?”

“I’ll go pay her a visit. After all, what woman can resist my charms?”

“Would you like them in alphabetical order or should I sort them by hair color? Now, that’s not a nice gesture for an old man like you to be making to a young impressionable lad such as myself.”

It’s good to see him healing. Sirius could always cheer up James. It’s nice to know I can depend on that.

--

Despite my hectic schedule, I make time to attend my next class with Malfoy. I’m sure if people knew the whole story, they’d think this was petty on my part, but honestly I couldn’t care less about what others might think. That was always Harry’s big hang up, constantly worrying about standing out. Fortunately, James knew a thing or two about standing out and doing it in style. I might as well make the most of my unique situation.

From my table near him, I gesture to the Hat as Malfoy comes in. The Hat can take over from here. “There he is, Hat.”

The Hat whispers to me, “Indeed, Potter, watch and learn how it is truly done.” Raising its voice it laughs, “I find it odd that people who preach about breeding would hold him up as an example. How’s that mark feel little wizard? Would you like me to sing a song in honor of the occasion?”

Listen up, you stupid brats
For I have a tale to tell.
Of how a Malfoy got his Brand
and wet his pants as well.

It started with the wizard’s cup
the Tri school competition.
And ended with a Malfoy pup
getting boned in the bent position.

An honorable duel, this little brat
tried secretly to reave.
But his potion caught him out, the rat.
And a crime he did achieve.

He wailed and cried and tried to blame
the wiles of lovely Fleur.
But truth was seen by cup of flame
And his lies it did deter.

The Malfoy twat red-handed caught
was dragged before the cup.
And just as it aught
when asked it was, its answer it shot up.

"A brand you'll get, the curs mark yet!"
the punishment decreed.
And Dumbledore, that fossil bore,
Did the punishment accede.

A flash of fire, a burning brand.
Which will fade from him no more.
But the cherry was, he'd pissed himself
whilst lying on the floor.

So what's the moral of this story?
You ask trying not to think.
If you can't figure out this allegory,
then Hogwart's teachers stink.

The lesson for today is learnt
From this loathsome spotty rotter.
That you'll always come out second best
When you try and fuck with Potter.

Draco scowls, "I did not soil myself!"

"That's not what everyone in the Great Hall heard." The Hat reminds him.

Malfoy responds by thrusting his hand into his robe only to quickly pull it out as if it had been stung as the Gryffindor's laugh heartily. Even Goyle is fighting back a tiny smile.

The Hat roars with laughter. "Priceless! The little shit doesn't even know that consciously trying to hide the brand punishes him. It's a magical mark you shriveled piece of crotchfruit! Have your spells been weaker? You may want to see if your wand is still a good match for you during the holidays?"

As always, I'm in awe of Godric's finest creation. The last was only a hunch we'd been discussing. Of the handful of people ever to receive this punishment, none had ever written about deeper effects. Still, forcing him to endure a few hours with Ollivander trying new wands is partial compensation for all the trouble the annoying git has given me over the years. It's enough for now and if he wises up and steers clear of me, I can live with that.

Somehow, I don't think he'll ever be that smart, so I'm fairly certain that this isn't the end.

"Think you've won, Potter?" Getting ripped a new one by a thousand year old hat makes Malfoy a little uncomfortable. He seeks safety in trying to draw me in to the conversation.

"No, Delacour is on top of the standings for the moment. I've got some ground to make up, but give me some time."

He hisses, "I'm not talking about that!"

I feign ignorance. "Then what are you talking about? The only time we're ever in direct competition is on the Quidditch Pitch and we know how that has turned out. You seem to believe that we're archrivals or something, which couldn't be further from the truth. You're just my annoying fourth or fifth cousin that I have to tolerate being around at school."

I hit him where it hurts by not only trivializing him, but reminding him that we're distantly related through Dorea Black-Potter.

Even a few of the Slytherins titter nervously in their chairs. They prefer to confront people when they have the advantage. My housemates surrounding me seem all too eager to get back in my good graces. Part of me wonders how much it would take to instigate a brawl right here in the Defense classroom.

Draco scowls and glances towards the door looking for any signs of our “borrowed” Defense Instructor. I wonder if he’s pondering pulling out his wand. “Careful there, cousin, there’s no research on what might happen if you raise your marked hand to the party you wronged. The results could be fatal and your mum would be crying for her little baby again.”

Now I was completely making things up, but the horrified expression was absolutely worth it and I got to work in his mum’s inadvertent slip of the tongue. Technically, Hogwarts is the wronged party, but who knows? The goblet might have its own interpretation of the punishment. Baby Draco is the first person to have this distinction in centuries.

“This isn’t over Potter.”

I shrug and roll my eyes, but my reply is directed to the Hat, “He seems delusional and believes there is something between us. Think I should be concerned?”

“I thought you humans didn’t talk openly about homosexuality at this age, but it may explain the boy’s unhealthy fascination with you. Best watch your cornhole there, Potter. He’s likely to try and holster his wand in it.” I don’t have to look at Draco’s face to know that it is beet red. I guess the lesson is, don’t mess with Potter and certainly don’t mess with the Sorting Hat. The shocked laughter around us merely serves to underscore that point.

Further conversation is interrupted by our new Defense instructor entering. Cornhole? That’s just wrong. Again, I wonder where the hell it comes up with these things.

--

“Harry! What on earth are you going to do with all that?”

I grin at Hermione while floating several crates down the hallway. I’m a little winded after moving three giant granite slabs. “You’ll just have to wait and see like the rest. I’ve got my strategy for the puzzle room pretty much worked out.”

“Australian Bunyip hide, exotic potions ingredients, Peruvian Darkness powder, three industrial cauldrons, and enough stone to start your own quarry – I’m almost afraid to know what you’re planning.”

Smiling at my friend’s thinly veiled curiosity, “Word to the wise, bring some earmuffs...”

“I’ll keep that in mind.” Despite her casual grin she looks concerned.

“What is it, Hermione? You’re not getting worried about the competition are you?”

“Maybe a little. Don’t laugh, but I’m sick of studying. I’m beginning to feel a bit burnt out and decided to come down and see what you’re up to.”

She looks like she needs an ego boost. “You’ll be fine, trust me. You could probably take your OWLs today, your NEWTS tomorrow, and graduate Hogwarts by the weekend.”

Hermione blushes at the praise, but still appears nervous. “Well, I might give a perfectly acceptable answer for a fourth year student, but it might not be up to the standards they are expecting. My answers have to be the most correct in the event of a tie. Besides, I seem to recall a certain someone who is nearly inconsolable every morning of a Quidditch match, so you have no room to talk.”

I gave her a little bit of cheek back. “Well, that’s just the morning of. We’re still two days away. I think you’ve seen the last of my Quidditch jitters. Next year, I’ll be on the team defending the cup and also be the Triwizard champion to boot. That’s a lot to live up to, if you know what I mean?”

She grimaces at me. "Modesty doesn't seem to your strong suit these days, especially when you're trailing in the points race at the moment."

"I've got my opponents right where I want them."

"Nine points off the overall lead? Well, just be careful that you don't get a big head, or should I say a bigger head." She gestures and floats a few crates down the hallway. "What's in these?"

"More chemicals," I say with no intention of telling her about the case of liquor that Dung Fletcher "acquired" for me. At the door to my laboratory I stop to thank her. "Thanks for helping me get this inside. All of Hogwarts is in your debt, Miss Granger. Again, you prove that you are the brightest witch in your gener...Oi! That's not a very lady like gesture!" I send a weak Tickling hex her way and jump through the door securing it behind me. That'll teach her!

Since, I have a private sanctuary where no one is allowed access, I'm honor bound to use it for less than honorable purposes. There's a bloke in France who would hound me about it. After all, I'm still a Marauder. Ironically, when I'm around Hermione, I "feel" more like Harry. She must bring out the kid in me. Oddly, so does Sirius, but in a far worse way. It's probably because I relate to Black as James and Granger as Harry. People who Harry and James both spent a good deal of time around, like Minerva and Hagrid, are a bit more difficult to sort out.

That is particularly true of Albus Dumbledore. I have no idea what to make of the man! He should be personally training me and preparing me for the inevitable resurgence of Riddle. Instead, he seems content to see me treated as just another student. It begs the question, has the old man gone senile? Even in the Marauder's time, he was a bit off and as "Harry" I haven't really seen him cut loose. Does he even have "it" anymore?

Honestly, I don't know which idea frightens me more, that he is consciously being lax with Riddle's forces gathering or that he's a washed up has been who's finally lost it.

Either way, I can't depend on him. That's the only thing I do know for certain.

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"I'd like a word, Potter." One of the ginger dillweeds approaches me. He's clearly been waiting for me to come down from my dorm room. The common room is pretty full. The smell of confrontation is in the air.

"What makes you think I have anything to say to you Fred, or is it George?"

"If you can't tell, there's no point in saying. Either way, we know you were behind the dungbomb explosion."

"How can you be certain? I've heard that storing cheap wheezes together can lead to know end of trouble."

"Your best mate Granger is sharp as a tack, but gullible. We simply went to her and said you admitted to it and if we wanted to know why we should ask her and she'd explain. Granger seems to take herself very seriously, doesn't she?"

Undone by Hermione's need to lecture people, curses! I look over at her on the couch and watch her mouth an apology to me. "Okay, so what? I got rid of all your toys. Boo-Effing-Hoo. You two left me tied up in a blanket at the edge of the forbidden forest. Ever think about that? How about sticking Neville to the wall just because he wouldn't tell you where we went to?"

My voice is raised enough that we're now the center of attention. "You're going to pay, Potter."

I laugh, "I've got a couple of Knuts in my robes here somewhere. Is that about right? Look you and your brother are small time compared to the Marauders and if I didn't have this tournament to deal with I'd like nothing better than to run circles around the two of you on a daily basis, but I just don't have the time right now. There's a week or so

when the tournament ends. Check back then and we can have a jolly old time."

"You'd like that wouldn't you? You're not getting the last laugh here Potter. Any day you've got a task, we'll go easy on you. Any other time, we can and will make your life miserable!"

Hermione's wide eyes tip me off and I flatten as the hex flies over my head. Balding jinx by the look of it. It strikes an unfortunate second year named Natalie. The other twin must have been disillusioned, but he's visible now. My Disarming charm is blindingly fast and I stick that wand to the wall. I spin to the other one only to find him frozen in mid-draw. Hermione's expression is not amused. She's a fast draw when angered. I give her a wink and notice Ron has his wand out as well. Who was he planning on helping?

"Enough!" Holly Lynch bellows trying to reassert control and restore some semblance of order. "Not in the dorms, not in the common room. Five points from everyone that cast a spell or two points from everyone who drew their wand – or tried to draw their wand. This tower is off limits to your little prank war. You get me Weasleys? Potter? Granger? There are other students in this tower and we have tests, homework, and the rest of our lives to think about! Without trying to do it in your personal playground! Beth, do you still have some Hair Restorative? Go get it. Its okay Natalie honey, don't cry. We'll get you fixed up in a second."

Her scathing gaze tries to literally burn a hole through the wandless twin and then me after the twit balks. I meet her stare and reply, "It's about damn time you started acting like you're in charge. Let's see if you can keep it up or if you're just putting on a show."

--

"Hey Harry."

"Welcome to the Hogwarts infirmary, Ron. How may we be of service today?"

"Got anything for a fierce headache?"

“Give me just a second.” I walk back into the dispensary and fill out the log book. I don’t think for a minute that he has anything wrong with him, but I’ve become a fan of theater as of late and decide to see how this drama plays out.

A minute later I bring it out to him. “Here you go.”

“Thanks Harry. Listen, about the twins...”

“Thought you were here about the pain in your head not the pains in my arse.”

He lets out a little chuckle. “That’s pretty funny. Anyway, they’re going too far. Take it from someone who’s been their favorite target growing up. Back when I was nine and ten, I couldn’t wait for them to go back to school. They’re not used to anyone but Mum or Bill stopping them in their tracks like that.”

“Honestly Ron, there’s not a whole lot of difference between Fred and George and my cousin Dudley except for the ways they dole out the humiliation. I’m not a big fan of people who try to throw their weight around, especially when they clearly can’t take what they are so happy to give.”

“Like I said, they’re going too far these days. When we first got here and they were in their third year, I thought they were going to humiliate me on a daily basis, but by then picking on an ickle firstie didn’t really seem like a challenge to them, so they were always after Wood and the upper-class types. Now that they are sixth years and with the year ‘off’ between OWLS and NEWTS, I think they’re bored and looking for trouble.”

“That’s probably all they’re likely to find with me. I wasn’t put on this earth to keep their idle hands busy.”

“True, but look at it this way, when you told them that they don’t match up to your dad and his group, you struck a deep nerve. They’ve been telling themselves for years that the only thing holding them back from being the greatest pranksters ever is that our family

is so poor. They keep thinking that their ship is going to come in and they'll be rich overnight or some rubbish. You think I'm bad about having no money try listening to them talk about it!"

I'd never really thought of it that way. The dillweed duo is jealous. "So, instead of trying to beat me into the ground because I'm famous for stopping a Dark Lord, they want to have a go at me because I'm well off and the sole link to the Marauders."

"That's the way I see it. They've pretty much exhausted all their targets and who they can prank without going after lower classes and looking petty. Best I can tell is that you're more than a match for them and that's only making them angrier."

"So where's that leave you?"

"Well, I haven't been a good friend to you this year and we both know it. I wanted to say I'm sorry about that and warn you about how nasty the twins get when they don't get their way. If it starts getting out of hand, I'm going to write Mum and she'll put an end to their nonsense. You just say the word and I'll be glad to."

"You'd do that?"

"Yeah, you know that story they always tell about turning my teddy bear into a spider?"

"Yeah."

He points to a little scar on his forearm. "They always seem to forget that it bit me and how they weren't sure whether it was poisonous or not, so they crammed a Bezoar down my throat and tried to threaten me into making an Unbreakable Vow never to tell Mum about it."

Patching up a friendship over mutual dislike of his brothers' obsessions isn't how I pictured Ron trying to get back on my good side, but what the hell! "Thanks for keeping an eye out for me, Ron. I appreciate it. Look, we're not as close as we used to be. We might never be like that again, but I don't forget the people around me. I'm starting to really see what comes with being famous, both the good

and the bad. You know that Puddlemere's General Manager is keen on recruiting me. If you seriously want to be a Keeper, I can get you into their youth training camp they run each summer."

Ron's eyes light up, Puddlemere runs the most exclusive summer camp around. Those same eyes darken, "I wouldn't want you paying for me, Harry."

"I wouldn't. All I have to do is ask them for a favor. I know you well enough to know that you want to make your own mark. I'm just offering a helping hand along the way. What good is being the Boy Who Lived, if I can't help open doors for my mates? It's the way all those stuck up purebloods get ahead. I doubt Lucius Malfoy paid a Knut for all those Nimbus 2001's. He made a floo call to someone who owed him a favor and just like clockwork seven brooms show up at Hogwarts. I might not be able to do that just yet, but I can easily open a door or two for a bloke who has been good to me over the years."

"You'd really do that?"

"Sure, why not." I don't feel the need to mention that I can also go the other way and torpedo Angelina Johnson's chances at the Spring Leagues.

Ron leans in a little closer. "One thing I wanted to mention is that in Hogsmeade the other day, I bumped into Charlie and a few of his friends."

I scratch my chin. "Shouldn't he be back in Romania by now?"

"Well that's what I was thinking to, but he says he's back here starting work locally on a short term contract. Now I had to ask myself, what in Merlin's name would require the services of a group of Dragon Handlers? The only thing I can come up with is the tournament."

Now that's something I can use. "Explains why he knew about it at the start of the year. They must be intending to use Dragons in one of the tasks ahead. When it suddenly expanded to six champions they

were talking about rescheduling things. Thanks for the tip, Ron. Keep an ear to the ground and let me know if you find anything else out."

He smacks me on the shoulder, "Count on it, mate. So, you got time for a game of chess?"

"Sure why not. Go get your board. You know in the Muggle world there are people who make their living playing this game?"

"Without the moving pieces? Sounds kind of bland, but if people get paid to do it, it can't be all that bad. I'll have to keep that in mind."

--

"I'm impressed. I didn't think you'd be such a fast learner." The Head Girl sends a bit of praise my way, even if she sounds annoyed at babysitting me. "It looks like you'll be Apparating in no time."

I ponder what Melinda Turpin would think if she knew that I was holding back? I try to maintain my interest by examining her shapely little backside. It's a far more attractive destination than the hoop sitting a few feet away. "I'm always getting into sticky situations and this seems like an important thing to know. Besides, the sooner I master this, the sooner the both of us can get four hours of our week back. Are you ready for the Knowledge Bowl tomorrow?"

"As ready as I can be, I suppose. Lots and lots of studying." Obviously, it's not just Hermione feeling the pressure.

"Pucey still being an unsupportive prat?" This draws a mocking bit of laughter from one of the nearby Slytherins out there with us and Melinda shoots him a dirty look.

"We're on a bit of a break for the moment."

I don't pay much attention to the legendary Hogwarts Gossip Network, but two nights ago, I saw them walking together after my little spat with the twins, so this must be a late-breaking development. "Oh, I see. Well, I figured he couldn't handle it. Good on you." This evokes another guffaw from the Slytherin.

"I didn't ask for your approval, Potter. Shouldn't you be concentrating?" She gets red in the face and looks suddenly upset. Oh, it looks like she was given the heave ho. Subtle move there Pucey, cutting her loose a few days before her biggest day in the spotlight – probably hoping to throw off her performance. That's a petty loser if I've ever seen one.

"It's his loss then Melinda. A talented witch like you deserves better than a bottom feeder. Your coattails are better off without him weighing them down."

"Just let it be and get focus on why you're here – Apparating." She sounds a bit defeated.

I stay quiet and continue pretending to work on Apparition. Next time we're out here, I'll go ahead and really try and get this out of the way. With the staff duels coming up, I've spent almost no time practicing with one since the Puzzle room challenge is consuming the majority of my time. I'll risk losing a few archaic staff matches, if it means getting my grubby little Animagus hooves on Flamel's pensieve.

Thirty minutes later, the gong sounds and all the students practicing start taking their hoops over to the stand. An idea has begun to take shape – an awful, evil idea worthy of a once and future Marauder. I linger for a moment next to Turpin and make certain the eavesdroppers are gone.

"Thanks for hanging out here with me, Melinda."

"You're welcome, Harry. If you'll excuse me, I have to get back to studying. Roger will probably be down here with you next week."

I lightly grab her arm. "I didn't want to say this while Gartner was around, but it seems to me that Pucey did this to you on purpose just before your big moment. He wants you to do poorly."

Her look accuses me. "Why do you think that?"

“Because he’s a guy who can’t stand that his girlfriend is better than he’s ever going to be. Instead of rooting for you, he’s sabotaging you and counting on you to fail. He wants you to fail. Then after you botch it, he’ll graciously take you back and make it seem like you can’t succeed without him.”

“How do you know this?”

I can’t exactly tell her how threatened old JP was of Lily’s success now can I? “Let me guess, you’re not so hot when it comes to tomorrow’s subjects Transfiguration and Magical History?”

“They’re not exactly my strongest subjects.” She replies cautiously.

“Exactly, he wouldn’t have considered this if Ancient Runes was in the mix. Even confunded and half awake, you’d destroy the competition in that subject. So, like the little snake he is, he does this at the worst possible time ... for you that is. You need to shake it off and concentrate on doing as well as you can. Show him you don’t need his little games.”

I can see her anger building. “Merlin, you’re right! I’m an idiot. Well not any more. I’m going to go do some serious studying.”

“Need someone to quiz you?”

“Yes, but everyone has class this afternoon except for the team members. The other Prefects are covering all the rounds this evening. I suppose I could ask one of them.”

I clear my throat, “Normally, I have Potions with Madame Pomfrey this afternoon, but today’s lesson is something I’ll be able to get through rather quickly. I’ll be happy to lend a hand.

She starts to say that I’m only a fourth year, but clearly remembers the golem from my duel with Cedric. “How good are you at Transfiguration, Potter?”

I give her a dazzling smile. “It’ll be like a private lesson with McGonagall, only I’m much more adorable.”

--

A bleary eye regards me, "What time is it?"

I shift pressing close to Melinda. A thin sheet separates our naked bodies; she's obviously a cover hog. "About three in the morning. Go back to sleep." I stroke a few loose curls off of her face.

The second eye opens and a flood of memories, hopefully pleasant come back to her. "Oh Merlin! You shouldn't be here. You shouldn't have been here at all! We shouldn't have done that! Shit! I'm almost eighteen and you're what? Just barely fourteen!"

I smile in the dim light and try to calm her before she goes into a panic. "I don't know about you, but I had fun. Was I better than Pucey?"

She practically hisses back at me, "Yes, but that's not the point! This was wrong and no one can find out about this."

Okay, it was probably shameful of me to dazzle Melinda here with my knowledge of Transfiguration for several hours, sneak down to my laboratory and return with a bottle of rum to help her relax, and finally convince her that a massage would get rid of all that tension – among other things – before the competition in the morning. On the other hand, I really needed a good shag and despite what she's saying now, a few hours ago, she seemed to believe it was a smashing idea on more than one occasion. I have very good hands and the memories of a rather successful Casanova up in my skull. Even with the age difference, it hadn't been that hard to get her to drop her defenses and shortly afterwards her robes. It makes me wonder how that time at Oliver's apartment with Penny really would have gone if he hadn't interrupted.

I shift and start nuzzling her neck. There's a sweet spot around there somewhere. Ah, there it is. In between, I whisper to her. "No one will. I'm not some braggart Melinda. Not a soul in this castle will know except for the Sorting Hat. Even if I was, people would probably be congratulating you. Still, I don't want to see either of us up on the

front page of the Prophet and I don't want any of those so called 'reformed' Death Eaters to catch wind of this. I'm a notoriously private person and aim to keep it that way."

"You mean you're not expecting us to be a couple or something?" I can't tell if she's disappointed or relieved, probably a bit of both.

"I like you Turpin. You're a sweetheart. I wasn't lying when I said that you're an attractive witch with a brilliant future ahead of you. I'm not expecting anything. I just didn't want you to go into that competition tom ... well, today doubting yourself. You needed someone to remind you how good you really are. I didn't mind volunteering."

Her resistance is fading. In the dim light, I grab a wand off the nightstand – hers I think and use a Breath Freshening charm on both of us to make snogging a bit more pleasant and take a quick swig from the remaining alcohol and pass it to her. Firewhiskey's good for getting pissed, but nothing sets the mood like a little Captain Morgan. This spiced stuff was introduced after JP met his end, but he would have liked it. I sure do. One thing's for certain – she's got a little captain in her.

A few minutes pass and we're both wide awake now. "Harry, we should stop. I should either be sleeping or studying. This is ... nice, but it's still wrong."

"Fine, what are Preylette's four principles of elemental Transfiguration? You answer correctly and I'll keep doing this."

"It's a little hard for me to compose a proper answer when you're doing that with your hands."

"Consider it a simulation of answering under pressure, unless you want me to stop?" I tease her slightly.

"...no, keep going. Preylette's four principles cover the transfiguration of base stone into ... into living material. The first refers to the amount of innate resistance to alteration based on the density and type of stone...The second is..."

I half-heartedly listen, but only to make certain she's getting it right, although repeatedly stammering "faster Harry" during an answer might cost her some points in the overall scoring. After only five questions, she doesn't feel like studying anymore and wants to move onto a subject that interests me as well.

All that's left is for me to sneak into her water closet and put a little "HJ" next to the "JP and SB" and put a single line under it. Oh yeah, and I still want to know why Roger calling her "Mindy" yanks her chain.

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Out in the crowd, I watch the still somewhat tense, but rather confident Head Girl answers her first set of questions. If she'd only accepted my theory that showering together was necessary to keeping our tryst a secret. In a surprisingly humorous twist, one of her questions just so happens to be on Preylette's second principle. Most people probably chalk up her coughing fit to nerves, but I know the truth.

Unfortunately, so does the Sorting Hat, and naturally it feels the need to comment. "Finally broke down and bedded some wet behind the ears schoolgirl eh, Potter? Do you feel better now? What's your next great feat going to be, HJ? Going to pull a rabbit out of a hat? Pick a card, any card?"

"You're not going to spoil my mood today, Hat, but I'm starting to wonder how much the Around the World Special at that spa in Tuscany costs."

"Eight hundred and thirty galleons, but the rumor is that it is that they make you take a vow of silence about what happens during it."

"Would they be able to bind you to a vow of silence?"

"We'll cross that bridge when we get to it, HJ. Granger's up now. Time to see if McGonagall's gamble pays off."

Hermione looks intimidated being out in the center of that wide stage at that podium all by her lonesome.

"If she doesn't do well today HJ, you should probably give her the same treatment you gave Turpin."

"Not funny, Hat. Besides, look how easily she fielded that first question. Good, she's covering all the bases."

"Sounds like she's going back digging them up and covering them again if you ask me. I think they wanted an answer not a dissertation."

"Can't fault her enthusiasm though, give them hell, Hermione!"

"For fuck's sake! It's about damn time someone cut her off. I think that's the Minister of Education from Portugal. He's the one trying to steal McGonagall out from under Dumbledore's crotch. Dumbledore should be worried; this shriveled prune looks like he's only in his eighties. If she's in the market for a younger man, Dumbledore might have to look to Sprout for his duty punch. Who knows what kind of fungal infections she might have."

"That's wrong on so many levels!"

It spends the next minute trying to fill my head with images, while I mentally try to fend them off. I mostly succeed, but the image of a scantily clad Pomona Sprout with African Creeping Vine crawling all over her body has scarred me for the foreseeable future. Now I have a reasonable excuse for skiving off Herbology for the next few weeks.

Meanwhile, Hermione is doing decently, but has taken a turn for the worse. Her answer to the third question was a bit weak and she knows it. Come on you can bounce back! What's the fourth question? Principles behind Animagus Transformation! Oh that's a good break, I know you know this. Good work through it, nice and easy – wait, slow down, don't babble.

"Damn! She's right, but she doesn't sound like she thinks she's right."

"Looks like I was correct! You spent the night stroking the wrong witch's ego."

"Please! If we did that, Hermione would be out of her mind right now trying to figure out what it all means. She doesn't have the life experience for a casual shag."

"Good point, but she's completely missed the last question. Right now she's screwed, but not in the good sort of way."

I shrug. "She didn't do that badly. That question is above NEWT level. Odds are the Beauxbatons student won't know it either. She got four out of five in the Transfiguration round, which might not be up to her standards, but sometimes I don't think she knows just how obsessively insane her standards are."

We continue to the banter while it tries to convince me to diddle my best friend. The wizard from France only manages three out of five and Hermione wins her round and Hogwarts leads Beauxbatons five to two going into the History round. She's probably the most miserable looking winner I've seen outside of Fleur after our duel. Speaking of the French witch, I see her a few rows over with her eyes closed in deep concentration. What is she doing?

A few students down is Aimee doing the same thing. "Hat, Beaucourt and Delacour look like they're meditating. Can you spot Krum or Manos? I see Diggory. He doesn't seem to be up to anything, but I think something's up."

"No, they're not in my line of sight, but I agree that something's going on."

I scan the group surrounding Cedric and catch Hannah Abbott's eye. It's not hard. She's sort of staring at me. I point at Cedric and she's kind enough to get his attention. I point at our competitors. It takes Diggory a moment to spot what I am pointing at and he looks just as confused.

There's a ten minute break mostly for the crowd and I take off the Hat and tell it to save our seats and immediately move towards Cedric's entourage with Neville in tow. It's somewhat shameful, but I use

Neville to deflect Hannah and Susan while addressing my co-champion. "What do you think that is all about?"

He shakes his head. "I'm not certain. They were definitely meditating."

I scan the group, "Anyone run into something out of sorts yesterday?"

Marietta Edgecombe speaks up, "Yesterday in Hagrid's class, he left us for about ten minutes to oversee the delivery of some cages. I didn't really think much of it, but there were six of them and they didn't go to his shack, they were taken up to the castle instead."

Cedric looks to his girlfriend Cho for confirmation who agrees. "Sounds like they're going to lock us up, Harry. This must be one of those 'surprise challenges' they kept talking about."

I'm looking around and spot something. "Look over there in the corner. Karkaroff is with Manos and Krum and trying to look discreet. They must know about something."

Cedric nudges Cho and she stares intently. I wonder what she's doing. Finally, the Asian speaks, "Their talking about maintaining mental focus, intimidation, and occluding."

"How do you know?"

"I can read lips fairly well. Effective even against most Privacy charms, unless they are visual as well as audible."

"That's a right useful talent." My respect for Chang ticks up a notch and she gives me a grin. It takes me a minute to remember making several comments about how pretty she was with Ron last year and now I realize that she probably "heard" what we were saying. My quasi-adult sensibilities are overridden by teenage hormones and I end up blushing a bit.

Well she still is rather attractive. Of course why am I being a little kid about this? Wasn't I shagging the Head Girl last night? If I didn't mind

blowing my secret, I could tell her stories about her auntie that would make her crimson.

Back to the matter at hand, "So, something is definitely up. Whatever it is, it doesn't sound like a spell casting challenge."

Susan Bones says, "My auntie is here today, if that means anything?"

Cedric scratches his head, "Okay, we've got cages, the Director of Magical Law Enforcement, and something about mental focus. What do you think gang?"

A lanky bloke named Summerby who is Diggory's best mate speaks up, "Maybe they're going to pit you against a Legilimens and see how long you can keep one out?"

I choke back a bit of bile. No fucking way I'm letting someone in my head! Edgcombe shakes her head. "I don't think so, Alan. It takes Wizengamot approval to use it on a convicted criminal. Plus, that wouldn't explain the cages. Besides, part of this whole tournament is about entertaining the crowd. How much fun would it be to see you all sitting there in a staring match with someone?"

Neville, listening intently makes his own observation, "What if you're not going in the cages, but something else is?"

"Good point, Longbottom," Cedric replies. "The cage might be for something else."

Further speculation is cut short by the chime telling everyone to return to their seats. I convince eager to please Hannah to switch seats with me so I can sit back here with Diggory during the History round and use my wand to Summon the Hat as she leaves with Neville. Although, the end result is I'm sitting next to Susan Bones and she looks like she's going to wet herself.

"So how much do you know about meditation, Harry?" Cedric asks. "I only know some basic focusing techniques that I use for complex Transfigurations."

"I can hold my own." I answer evasively while bringing the Hat up to speed.

"Cages eh? Let's see what they've got up their sleeve. Sorry, I'm not spending any time up in Dumbledore's office; otherwise I could probably fill you in. You'll just have to rely on your own talents to get you through this."

"I suppose I could cry foul, but on the other hand, they don't know about the dragons yet."

"Going to let Diggory in on it?"

"Not in a big crowd, but I'll clue him in somewhere down the road. Maybe, I'll mention it to him right before our staff match and see if it throws him off his game?"

"Um Harry," Susan starts, "I don't suppose you've decided who you're going to the Yule Ball with?" She's on a fishing expedition it seems.

"Haven't really given it much thought yet. How about you?" I turn it back on her much to her discomfort. She's got bait on the hook, but I'm in no mood to bite.

"I've had a few people ask and I'm weighing my options." She responds carefully. Give her some points for courage. Susan's letting me know she's available, but if I don't act soon, she'll move on. Sadly, she might be in this body's age group, but Miss Bones doesn't match up to my mental age. Still, assuming I don't have a Dark Lord in the picture, I'm already making plans for my sixth and seventh year to be one long continuous orgy. Susan should have matured by then. If she's still as smitten with me by then we can certainly arrange something.

I suppose I should give Melinda first right of refusal to this dance thing. That'd probably wind Pucey up, but since I am supposed to be discreet, I doubt it's going to happen. I suppose, I could go a step higher and ask Penny provided Ollie doesn't object. It'd be especially nice to see Percy Weasley's reaction since he's likely to be there,

although Cedric's father, Amos, is on his way to being approved for the vacancy left by the retiring Barty Crouch, Senior.

"I hate to interrupt your visions of future debauchery, but it looks like your friend Granger is up again and History is, shall we say, repeating itself."

Hermione only manages three of her five History questions. Oh that's not good. Hopefully, her Beauxbatons opponent isn't that good with the same set of questions.

Unfortunately, for Hermione the French Wizard is a perfect five for five on magical History and wins that point. Beauxbatons is trying to mount a comeback, but Roger slams that door shut. He really knows his history. Despite winning the History round four to three, Beauxbatons loses overall eight to five.

This evening Durmstrang will take on Beauxbatons followed by Hogwarts versus Durmstrang tomorrow. By winning Hogwarts gets the extra night of study, so well done to the boys and girls in black.

Madame Maxim approaches the podium and congratulates Hogwarts and Beauxbatons on their fine efforts. "We would normally dismiss you, but we have a surprise challenge for our individual champions. If they would be kind enough to join us here on stage with their advisors?" A wave of her wand conjures six wooden chairs on the stage while Dumbledore floats the six cages out of the back room.

We get a round of applause as the murmuring and speculation begin. The Puffs and Claws whom I am now sitting beside wish both Cedric and me the best of luck.

"What if it is a Legilimens?"

"Then don't let your guard down, HJ. From what I recall, anytime they've done something like that, the contestants are given a specific memory to protect."

Once up on stage, I look at Beaucourt and Delacour. "Hello again. How's that meditation coming?"

They both give a quick smile and go back to their intense concentration. The cages are resting in pre-marked locations. Leading up to each cage are ten lines spaced at one foot intervals.

Maxim continues in her heavy French accent, "A true champion must be able to react to the unexpected and show courage in the face of fear. The purpose of this surprise task is to demonstrate which among our brave champions has the courage to step boldly into the face of their greatest fears."

I sigh heavily having a good guess of what they have in mind. Hagrid makes certain the cages are in the correct position while the doors to the Great Hall open. Several Aurors and ominous figures in black cloaks stand in the entranceway. The fucking dementors of Azkaban inside Hogwarts. Damn! I was right! Each of the six is escorted into the chamber by a pair of Aurors. They spread out and take different paths to the main stage and giving the crowd a small dose of what we're in for.

Trust the DMLE to turn an event into a chance to drive fear into the hearts of future wrongdoers by giving them a taste of what they can expect. Fear, hopelessness, and a sudden drop in temperature ripple through the room like a wave. Mist created by the breath of those suddenly shivering creates a low floating fog. A pale looking Hagrid leads them past us and puts one in each cage. The panoramic of the great hall changes into an overhead view of the stage and I flick my eyes over to Dumbledore wondering what potions he has been abusing to buy off on this one.

"The Trial of Courage pits each contender not only against the others, but against his or her own fears. Each will start at the ten foot line, every minute the chime will sound and they must step one foot closer within ten seconds or be disqualified. At any time a champion may choose to step forward and the others must join that champion within fifteen seconds or be disqualified and must return to the chair where you are seated presently. In the event that more than one champion reaches the one foot line, they will remain there until one remains and claims victory. If you would each please surrender your wand and take your starting position."

Hagrid comes by and collects the wands. They really want to underscore the feeling of helplessness. Beaucourt is already trembling slightly. I look over at the blanched face of Cedric. "Just like our match only this time we don't have that far to fall, eh mate?"

His reply is devoid of any humor. "Right, just a walk in the park."

Ten feet away from a group of dementors, you can really feel them circling around. I hear James shouting for Lily, baby Harry's screams, and of course Voldemort's taunting laughter. Unlike before, I had no reference for these voices and I can see the scene already in my mind. Ruthlessly, I slam down my Occlumency barriers. Instead of fear, I feel more anger. What do these little shits beside me have to be afraid of? How many of them have the memory of their death emblazoned across their psyche?

The crowd continues to murmur with an uneasy fervor settling over the Great Hall. They want their entertainment and we six dancing monkeys are on display for their viewing pleasure.

If I'd volunteered for this I'd probably be regretting my decision right about now. I glance back at the Hat on my chair.

It speaks, "This is pretty twisted even by my standards. Give no mercy, HJ."

At least that explains why Fleur and Aimee were meditating. Manos and Krum obviously know a little bit of Occlumency, but one thing I noticed after my defenses come up is that Fleur seems slightly brighter. Her innate aura seems to be reacting to their presence and trying to defend her. If she also knows Occlumency, she could be dangerous in this task.

Of course, I could change into my Animagus form and stand up here all day, but my secret is worth more than a mere ten points in this competition. Plus, I'm certain Fleur would be rather upset to learn that I am Monsieur Pronghorn. That would lead to an annoying conversation.

Once all of us are on the ten foot line, the officials clear the stage and the chime sounds beginning our contest of will power. To my left is Cedric in the first position. I'm in the fourth position with Athena Manos on my left and Fleur to my right. Is it going to be a silent ten minutes?

"So Potter, I heard you faced dozens of these things? Some of your schoolmates have said that you are particularly sensitive to these creatures." Manos starts. Her Occlumency must be better than average if she's going to start trying to distract people.

"Yes, but these are cage bound and I only have problems with packs larger than this. Of course I also have Fleur's aura here to deal with as well."

The Greek Witch replies, "Yes I had wondered what was going to happen with that as well."

"It is a natural defense mechanism. Whine all you wish, Athena." Fleur hisses back.

"I'm not whining, merely pointing out that your aura might be giving the men around us a boost."

"Ladies, please. Can't we all be friends up here? If Fleur can't be around me without losing control, who am I to argue?" Fleur snorts as the chime sounds and we all take a step forward to the nine foot mark.

"So, who up here is trained in the mental arts? I have heard that advanced meditation is taught at Durmstrang." Aimee asks from the first marker.

"I've been told I'm pretty thick headed, if that counts?" Cedric replies trying to fight fear with humor.

"Unfortunately, no" Aimee replies dryly with her voice trembling a bit.

"If it is worth knowing, I know it." Krum says tersely from his position at the end. "I will out last all of you."

I can't resist. "Well if you're fear is failing to win Krum, you must be getting used to it by now? So all this finishing behind someone else must be good practice."

Both Fleur and oddly Manos chuckle at my direct provocation and here I thought this was going to be a silent struggle. Instead we're trying to throw each other off our game. Krum responds by stepping immediately to the eight foot line. I step closer to the abyss and join him. Most of the others let the countdown go for a few seconds before stepping forward. Cedric and Aimee are clearly weakening. They'll be out soon.

"You're looking a little pale, Potter." Athena says mockingly.

"Da, you are right, Athena. He won't last much longer."

"But Viktor, he's doing very well when faced with creatures that nearly killed him."

"Every few months something nearly kills me folks – it's nothing new. They had their shot and couldn't do it. Besides, people are always saying I need more color in my skin, but my question Athena is how do you maintain that perpetual tan? It's got to be potions. Am I right? Beauty in a bottle?" I chuckle and step to the seven foot line early. Affecting my best pirate voice I ask loud enough to be heard by the first few rows, "Coming me hearties?"

Most everyone struggles forward as my statement is repeated throughout the crowd drawing a roar of approval. Too bad they didn't configure the ceiling of the Great Hall for sound. The posturing would only add to the entertainment. Cedric and Aimee again have the worst problems. Viktor and Athena continue to work on me in tandem like a pair of Harpies.

"When do you think ... Potter will drop out, Viktor?"

"I think I see him shivering right now. I don't think he'll last to the fourth marker."

I turn to Fleur. "They seem to forget that you're in first place."

She doesn't look up, continuing to focus on the next line in front of her. "They think you're vulnerable here based ... on your ... history."

"History ... is mostly based on rumors." I grunt slightly and force myself to step early to the sixth line. Aimee audibly whimpers and the crowd cheers.

Time winds down and the judge cautions, "Mr. Diggory, Miss Beaucourt you must step forward, now." Cedric makes it. Aimee can't and is eliminated to a polite applause. The dementors are already leaning forward pressing against the bars tasting the forbidden fruit.

A quiet falls on us as each seeks to find their second wind. I keep reminding myself that my greatest fear is just a faded memory of something Harry James Potter had no control over. Man, I could really use a nice bar of chocolate now. Where's Poppy when I need her? Lily did have a beautiful voice, didn't she? Find solace in the memory. James was noble, willing to sacrifice himself for his wife and child. Lily on the other hand was willing to sacrifice everything and everyone. I exist because of that determination.

Second wind found. "Where's your bluster now, Krum? Manos?"

Fleur hisses and steps forward to the fifth line. "You all talk too much. It is like the bickering of children."

Cedric can't go on and gets a loud cheer from the hometown crowd. I step forward, but notice my feet are beginning to get reluctant. Some hero huh? It's tempting to walk right now, but I'm not letting these kiddies get the best of me. I won't catch Delacour with only two points and no one is going to cheat me out of victory this time! Last time I checked, I'm the chosen one and despite Tom Riddle's howls in my mind, he's not here and that means these things can't kill me.

Athena steps forward to the fourth line. No one seems interested in waiting for the minute chime any more. Krum waits the full fifteen seconds, but then walks straight to the third line. They're making their move to try and end it here. All four of us are clearly shaking and the

crowd is roaring. I dig deep and somehow join Viktor at the three foot marker.

The cold is becoming unbearable. This close to them, the temperature is below freezing. I could do a wandless warming charm, but that's not going to help much. The air leaving our lungs comes out in plumes of white mist like a cold fire is burning on the stage fed by our fear. On the other hand, is my wandless banisher strong enough to move the entire cage? The dementors continue rattling against their cages trying to press themselves closer to us.

Viktor drops to his knees as the chime tones telling us to step to the second mark. I feel the pull of the creature begin. Its arms are too thick to get through the bars, but the bony fingers are flexing, inviting me to come closer. Lily's screams intensify, mixing with the cheers from the crowd. The din in my ears becomes maddening. Cold dry air makes it difficult to draw a full breath. Panic is starting to set in, but I refuse to relent. I cannot, will not, must not...

Manos struggles to step to the one foot mark, but she collapses.

"Rise or be disqualified, Miss Manos." Karkaroff shouts, part warning and part commanding her.

She tries, but is clearly crying. Athena won't make it. It's down to me and the Veela. So many things happen in the next seconds it's hard to make sense.

Athena starts crawling to the chairs.

The chime sounds.

Fleur and I start to inch forward.

Hagrid leaps onto the platform and shakes the entire thing with his landing. He shouts, "Freedom for Giants everywhere! Let my people go!" The crowd gasps struggling to understand.

He bowls over a pair of Aurors and hurls two objects. One object strikes the cages and the other hits the ground near him with a flash. I

feel some type of magic encircling us creating a magical barrier sealing the six of us inside. The table, with our wands on it is on the wrong side! Where the bloody hell did Hagrid get one of those?

The part of my mind that isn't trying to keep me from soiling myself knows that these rune walls are used to prevent people from fleeing or escaping. They don't last long, three minutes at the most, but that's not what sends a spear of despair through my entire body. The other device bounces off a cage and lands next to my foot. I recall it. It's known as an Unlatcher.

Over the yells of the crowd and the death wails of James and Lily thundering in my mind I hear the sound more frightening than everything else.

It's the sound of six cages unlocking and the doors opening. The dementors of Azkaban are about to get a rematch with Harry James Potter, only this time, I don't have a damn wand....

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Author's notes – Did that get the blood pumping? Hope the cliffhanger isn't too awful on you. I'll make you all a promise. Next chapter before this month is out. I'll get Turn Me Loose 7 done as fast as possible and get right back on this one. Visit my profile for the latest information on my original works.

Join me on DarkLordPotter or the FanFicAuthors forums for discussion of this story or if you just want to say hi.

Disclaimer – Even after all the names I was called for the cliffhanger at the end of the last chapter, this is still a work of fan fiction.

Acknowledgements – As always the hard work of Alpaca Fight Club (where the fur runs red with blood) – oops I mean Alpha Fight Club is greatly appreciated. Take a bow guys. My betas are Aaran St. Vines, ZanyMuggle, and Sparky40sw.

Chapter 14 – Sometimes, It's Good to be Me

November 19th, 1994

For a brief moment, one maybe two heartbeats, I'm frozen in terror. There's no shame in it. Anyone who had ever spent a few minutes in close proximity to a dementor would back me up on this fact. A Boggart might give the visual representation of someone's worst fear, but they lack any real psychological effects beyond surprise.

Dementors make a person relive their worst memories over and over again while pulling at the essence that is the soul. One can shut their eyes and a Boggart loses all power. It can be injured, maimed, or even killed, but that's just as stupid as killing a hippogriff because someone doesn't know how to act around one.

Nothing known to man kills a dementor and that's the biggest problem facing me. The second one is that I don't even have my bloody wand.

Seconds earlier, I was entertaining myself wondering if one "kissed" me would just James or Harry be sucked out. Now, entertainment is nowhere to be found as all six cages start to open after being unlocked by Hagrid's Unlatcher. Things don't add up. One would expect him to have an exotic magical creature, but not such a rare and potent device.

That wasn't the end of Hagrid's toys either. He also brought a rune wall. The wizards and witches outside should be able to tear it down pretty quickly, but a series of detonations in the crowd make me wonder if help is on the way. Pretty quickly seems a bit farther off than I'd hoped.

“Do something HJ!” The Hat screams. It and my five other wandless competitors are stuck behind this barrier.

The dementors seem momentarily confused, but then again, they’ve been allowed to “snack” on our torment for nearly ten minutes. I push the cage door back violently. Fortunately, they aren’t very strong relying on their victims to collapse in a paralyzed fear.

Anyone see the math problem here? Yeah, thought so. One Harry James Potter can’t hold six cages shut. Fleur is already backing away. Even if she hadn’t, there’d still be four dementors on the loose. Three of the dementors are already out of their cage. The other two are hesitating, but that’ll only last a second more before they realize that “snack time” just became a full course meal.

I let go of the cage and quickly start moving back across the wooden stage while evaluating and discarding plans at the speed of thought. Krum and Diggory both have their chairs in hand and are doing passable lion tamer impressions. Aimee has a different tactic altogether. It’s called the fetal ball. It’s hard to kiss someone if they’re face down on the floor with their head buried under their arms.

I could bolt into one of the cages and pull the door shut. That’d save me. What about the rest? I could transform into my Animagus form and physically terrorize the dementors. That might buy the time everyone needs, but dare I risk it?

Over the deafening screams of the crowd on the other side of the rune wall, my hand closes around my chair dumping the Hat onto the ground. Two of the abominations have closed on Athena Manos who is thrashing wildly on the ground. One is yanking her hair pulling her head off the ground and the other is positioning for a kiss. They begin quarrelling over her like a pair of animals fighting over a morsel – must be some kind of pecking order thing.

I dig real deep in the face of absolute panic and focus on my banisher. The chair shoots like a missile and plows into the pair over top of Athena launching the creatures towards the rune wall. I grab Athena’s chair and take three steps forward whacking a third one who swoops

in trying to get at the Durmstrang witch. Wood splinters and it spins to face me. James and Lily Potter's death wails surge through my being as it glides back to a standing position relatively unharmed. From the corner of my eye, I see Dobby furiously trying to get through the barrier. Again, I'm reminded of the limitations of house-elves.

Where the hell is Dumbledore? Delacour tries to conjure fire, but only gets a weak flame – about as frightening to a dementor as someone holding up a Muggle Zippo. She and Krum are retreating to the edge of the platform. They hold a quick meeting of the minds and come to a decision. She hurls the weak flames she can generate at the two near them and Krum lashes out with his chair leg doing his best beater impression. They dash through the small gap and into one of the cages, stealing my idea. Krum pulls the door shut while Fleur collapses in the center. She gives me a pitying look. Great now it's me versus six dementors. Gee thanks! Finally, someone's at the ward. It's only Karkaroff! I can't see Dumbledore and Maxime is literally wrestling with Hagrid's massive frame! Half dragging Athena across the floor I keep waving the broken remnants of the chair.

Cedric's wavering and has collapsed on top of Aimee intending to shield her with his body. He's a brave kid. More detonations, something serious is going on in the Great Hall. I don't have the time to figure it out.

Time's running out.

I need a miracle.

I drop the chair and push/throw Manos onto the quivering body pile of the closest champions. No other choice is left. I'll have to go Pronghorn and circle these three. I'll deal with Fleur's anger later. She'll just have to fucking deal with it! Just as I start my transformation, I hear something rise above the ruckus and pierce through the noise and the fear. It's a sound that stabs through the fog of despair like an avenging spear made of the purest hope. Even the dementors are forced to pause in the face of a phoenix's song.

Fawkes appears in a ball of fire right on top of me. The painful heat washes over me countering the icy needles of agony generated by

the proximity of the dementors. Light temporarily overwhelms all my senses. The bird's beak pecks at my open paw drawing blood and forcing my hand to clench tight and it releases an object into my hand. I barely hang on to the piece of wood and it takes me a millisecond to recognize my wand, now firmly in my grasp. A rune wall might stop a house-elf, but the magic of a phoenix is well beyond the power of that little trinket.

Fawkes leaps off my shoulder and begins ravaging the two dementors frustrated by Krum and Delacour. They recoil from that which does not fear them.

"Just summon a Patronus Potter and scatter them!" The Hat commands. Does it fear for its own soul? The problem is I've got nothing to draw on. I level my wand and try to find something happy. There's nothing but pain, fear, depression. I bellow the words, to try and compensate for my emotional impotence, but only a wisp of smoke emerges. I try it again and absolutely nothing happens. The dementors sense my desperation and close in.

Inner peace and happiness won't save me. What about pain and suffering?

I point my wand over the nearest one's shoulder and concentrate on the cage. My will makes it come to life. The top shoots off of it and drops from above onto one of my enemies. I focus on the rough shape I want and force it into. Metal bars curl like a vicious multi-fingered hand. The claw responds to my command and stretches out, grasping the dementor like a rag doll and digging its steely digits over the shoulder and into its chest.

I can't hear a dementor scream, but clearly its brethren can. Maintaining the Transfiguration against the negative energy field that surrounds them is difficult, but I sweep the metallic cage "arm" with the struggling dementor in its clutches into the two I had banished the chair into, giving me some room to breathe as the cold chill chases away Fawkes' warmth.

Transfiguration is the key. It's why the dementors still serve the wizards. Direct magic won't hurt one and despite current

appearances they're nigh invulnerable to physical attacks, but they can still be encased, entombed, and imprisoned. A Patronus properly cast will scatter them, but only chains weighing too much to allow them to move - shackles they can't escape - can give someone enough power to command one. My clawed hand raises the abomination into the air, but it's loosing cohesiveness and starting to break apart. Fine! I drive the damn thing down and through the wooden platform letting the pieces of metal fall onto it.

Chunks of the stage break away with my fast wand work and the timber forms a protective circle around myself and the three people huddled by my feet. Summoning the Hat to my hand, I hold it protectively against my robes muffling its shouts.

The soul hunters throw themselves at my wall of debris and rebound off of it testing my stamina. Fawkes reappears next to me and my mound o' champions. The phoenix looks worse for wear making me wonder how awful I must look. It trills at me conveying a sense of fatigue and urgency before disappearing again.

Best I can tell I've just been given the equivalent of, "You've got this under control. I have to go now."

Assuming I survive this, I'll have to give Fawkes a ration of crap about not having any staying power. I expand the barrier pushing them back. Letting the barrier falter, I transfigure a second cage and use it to pounce on a duo of dementors as strong metal twists them into awkward and certainly painful positions like some modern gothic sculpture. Maybe I should consider a career in art. I can do balloon animals too!

The maelstrom around me subsides and I look at the remaining trio of dementors just as Karkaroff succeeds in bringing the wall down. His wand is leveled at the guards of Azkaban. The whole encounter took perhaps ninety seconds. The skeletal hands of the one I drove through the floor of the platform appear at the edge of the hole and it slowly pulls itself up only to find my wand inches from its face.

"Keep it up and I'll chain you to a rock at the bottom of the lake until the metal rusts through!"

My threat gets its attention. They're not stupid; they know when they're beaten and they back off away from us. Maxime pulls one of the Ministry Aurors to his feet and he starts shouting orders at the dementors. Three strides from the massive brunette witch puts her right next to me.

Her tone is both fierce and commanding. "Were any of the other champions kissed?"

I'm exhausted, but still standing and still staring at the free group of dementors. My gaze wanders over to the shivering Viktor Krum still holding his cage shut. "I don't think so. Mind telling me what the fuck just happened?"

"Step aside!" She ignores both my language and my question. With a strength easily rivaling Hagrid's she rolls the whimpering Manos and Diggory off of her student and hoists her in the air. Apparently, Aimee gets preferential treatment. Karkaroff, no doubt fearing for his golden boy's image races to Viktor's cage and helps him out. Manos clearly isn't his priority. Over at the cage, Fleur slowly stands. She looks at me briefly and then looks away, probably ashamed. Seconds later others come charging over to check on the rest of us. I push through their arms and head towards the edge of the stage.

Over the rumbling of the crowd I hear magically enhanced calls for medical attention. I pull the Hat onto my head and start in that direction. I'm in shitty shape, but if I stop, I'm not going to get up for a few hours. Besides, now I have to know what's going on.

Passing by a quartet of Aurors guarding the motionless form of Hagrid, I hop off the stage listening to McGonagall's shouts for all students to return to their houses and for the prefects to provide an accurate muster immediately.

There are several small clouds of smoke being "held" against the ceiling of the Great Hall by a multitude of magic users led chiefly by Flitwick. My eyes burn slightly, welling up with tears and my throat quickly becomes raw. All around people are coughing and wheezing.

Quickly I apply a Bubblehead charm. It limits my ability to speak, but Hat gladly picks up that end of things for me.

“Stand aside you miserable fucks! Move it! Medical personnel coming through!” Perhaps I amplify my pushes with a little banishing shoving my way through the resistance of the crowd until I spot Poppy working feverishly with another man. Together they’re trying to literally hold a wizard together.

When I see the first man, or rather the torso of the first man with his lifeless eyes staring up at me, I know that something is dreadfully wrong. Nothing can save this one, but I move on to others that are injured. It looks like a powerful Cutting curse ripped through this section of the audience where mostly visitors from Durmstrang were seated. I reach down and pull an arm off the ground. It’s not attached to anything.

“No rest for the weary. Eh, Potter?” Hat bellows, “Which one of you worthless bastards is missing an arm? Raise your remaining hand and get over here while we can still reattach it!”

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From my vantage point slouched in the corner of Dumbledore’s office, I’m content to be a spectator this time. I had been assisting Poppy in her overfilled ward when Dumbledore entered with a traumatized Susan Bones and ushered her to a bed. His eyes caught mine and he beckoned me to follow saying only that Madame Bones would doubtless want to talk to me.

Naturally, everyone wants all the details of what happened and more importantly how those details don’t make them responsible for the three dead and numerous injured in the crowd. My little heroic showdown with the dementors seems to have been lost in the shuffle.

“Don’t be such a whiny little bitch! Look on the bright side HJ, it wasn’t you they were after. What do you know? Not every assassination attempt in this castle is about you!”

“Very funny, Hat. I should have stuffed you on one of their heads and seen what would have happened.”

Athena is clinging to the man whose arm I reattached. Roughly ten minutes ago, his dose of polyjuice wore off revealing that the nondescript wizard in his early forties was really a stately wizard of commanding stature approaching his centennial. In the “Who’s Who” of magical Europe, Agrippa Manos is covered somewhere in the first twenty pages. Athena’s Granddaddy is one part wealthy businessman/politician and one part criminal overlord. He’s a man with enemies and apparently they tried to strike today.

The passing attempt on my life, well that was just a side show distraction. Somehow, I feel cheated. Despite the noise, Fawkes slumbers on its perch reminding me that I should be sleeping this off instead of listening to all this posturing. Going through that rune wall must have taken quite a bit out of the phoenix.

A bloodied and clearly bewitched Hagrid was taken by the Aurors for treatment at St. Mungo’s for both his physical wounds, courtesy of Madame Maxime and Igor Karkaroff and whatever mental deprogramming they could offer. Owls have already started arriving demanding the not-so gentle giant be sacked. Dumbledore will probably be able to get away with demoting him back to Keeper of the Keys, but Hagrid’s teaching days are through.

The former Grindelwald collaborator from Greece speaks with a solemn tone. “Minister Fudge, Supreme Mugwump, you have my deepest apologies. Publicly, I was supposed to be at my residence in Greece. I do not know how these assassins were able to discover my itinerary, but rest assured, I will find out. My enemies have brought our conflict to a school filled with innocent children. It is most unfortunate ... for them.”

Dumbledore scowls at the man before him. "Had you alerted me to your presence..."

The Greek man laughs, "You'd have done what? We rotated the polyjuice on a daily basis on our trip. I travelled with nine bodyguards. You can barely run a school full of children and yet you expect me to

entrust my security to you? It's a bit late in life to be launching a career in comedy, Dumbledore."

Maxime clearly no stranger to power politics either throws her weight around, "Instead Agrippa, you come here unannounced with a bounty on your head. There is an infirmary full of injured people and half your bodyguards are dead. Yet when we call you on it you respond with ego rather than logic."

"Call off your pet giantess, Dumbledore. I've had my fill of 'giant's rights' today, haven't you? Still think they need larger sanctuaries and more freedom? I suppose the assassins knew my opinions on this matter which is why your half-breed was bewitched to bellow such sentiments. They were likely watching to see which one of my group reacted to it."

Maxime obviously wants a piece of him. "It would have been ironic if you had been done in because of your small minded views."

That triggers a new round of bickering. I listen to the angry shouts and chat with the Hat. "The ICW meetings must be a little more interesting than I thought."

"You young people have your Quidditch. The older ones also have their games, HJ."

"Maybe we should swing by their summer meeting on our way to Italy and watch the fireworks?"

With the smell of retribution in the air, Fudge wisely tries to move on to another topic. "What do we know of the assassins? You fought one of them, Albus."

Dumbledore looks up from the Marauder's Map of all things. He'd been using a specialized charm to make it replay the past hour. "The Asian man was supposed to be Fen Woo, a reporter with a periodical from Hong Kong. It appears that my distinguished ICW member was not the only person utilizing polyjuice today. This map identifies the person I dueled with as Kwan Chang-Ho. I also see the name of his partner Jacob Collins as well."

Fudge's furious gaze bores into Amelia Bones. "You mean to tell me that two of the most notorious hit wizards in the world were mere feet away from me and you had no idea of this Amelia? Did you even know they were in the country?"

Bones looks like she's just aged a decade within the last minute. "We are doing everything we can, Minister. I have the entire department mobilized."

"Well, for your sake, I suggest your department produces some tangible results. Mark my words, there will be an inquiry!"

The director loses even more of her composure, becoming both shrill and whiny. "I'm every bit as interested in justice being served. You will recall that my niece was held hostage during their escape. I do not believe that was happenstance!"

Hat provides its usual cheerful commentary, "All interested applicants for Director of Magical Law Enforcement position are encouraged to apply via owl. Special preference will be given to those willing to become either toadies or scapegoats and of course anyone willing to take it up the shit hole on command."

I search my memories of my other life. "I haven't heard the name Collins before, but even in James Potter's day people talked about Kwan Chang-Ho – an amoral killer whose name was whispered in back alleys all over the world, famous for leaving mahjong tiles in the mouth of his victims. The Death Eaters at least have their flawed ideology to cling to. This fucker will kill anything just for money and fame!"

"Another shining example of your species, eh HJ? Dueling Dumbledore to a draw won't hurt his resume either."

Good point. Thanks to James, I don't really have a high opinion of hit wizards. James considered dueling a high "art" and if a duelist is an "artist", then a hit wizard is a "house painter". "Given that Collins had his wand at Susan's throat the whole time until they were outside Hogwarts' wards probably lent the Korean an edge."

It lets out a derisive laugh in my mind. "That just goes to show what Dumbledore's true weakness is, HJ. Don't think for a second that Riddle won't know that either."

I nod while answering it. "True. Dumbledore said that they were quick to point out that they only attacked the group that contained their target and instead of using Muggle tear gas in the crowd they could have used fragmentation grenades and turned the place into a charnel house."

"Give them points for balls, HJ. Not everyone would have the audacity to attempt an assassination in the middle of an event this large. Even in failure, they will add to their legend. I wonder if the press will even mention how they used Muggle tactics so effectively against a room filled with Europe's most influential magic users. Watch that get glossed over."

Agrippa is speaking again, directly to Fudge and gesturing to Dumbledore and Maxime. "Minister, if your Aurors are satisfied and have no further need for my presence, I've had as much of these two as I can stomach. I will take my leave." He turns to Athena and speaks to her in Greek. I don't speak it, but clearly he is asking if she wishes to stay here and continue competing or leave. She and Aimee have the luxury of doing just that.

To her credit, Athena obviously wants to stay. There's some haggling, but within a minute or two Karkaroff suddenly has two new "assistants" from Agrippa's cadre whose sole concern is Athena's welfare. His glare bores into Karkaroff letting him know in no uncertain terms that he is "displeased". Finally, the elder Manos turns to leave before his eyes settle on me. He flexes his repaired left arm. "You do good work for one so young. There will only be a tiny scar. Athena also tells me you protected her and the others against the dementors. This I will not forget."

I give him a nod. The murderous intent returns to his face and he stalks out of the room. Southern Europe might not be very safe place to visit for the next few months.

Hat puts it all into perspective, "I hope this doesn't interfere with our trip to the spa in Tuscany."

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An hour or so later the blame game is winding down. Understandably, it's taken a while to get around to the mess that is the Triwizard Tournament. Dumbledore dismisses everyone except for those concerned with the workings of the Tournament and calls a brief recess.

Dumbledore sends a pair of house elves to fetch the other four champions. I take the opportunity to walk around and look at the Headmaster's odd collection of magical artifacts. Athena steps up next to me. Finally, she speaks. "In retrospect, my behavior on the stage before the emergency was childish and deplorable."

I give her a plain assessment. "You were trying to win using a team strategy and trying to exploit a perceived weakness. Fortunately for all of us, that weakness doesn't exist. Otherwise, we likely wouldn't be having this conversation."

"Nonetheless, I do feel it appropriate that I apologize. There have been two previous attempts on my grandfather's life. Each time they have killed one of his bodyguards pretending to be him. I guess they decided to just kill the entire party."

Kwan's tactics remind me of Vernon's rants growing up about the Irish Republican Army. "Just kill them all and let God sort them out." Odds are that I'll never cross wands with Kwan, but if I ever do, I won't forget what he and his partner did here today.

"In that case Athena, I accept your apology and am glad you decided to stay and continue competing. However in the future, you shouldn't rely on Slytherins for information about me. It is notoriously inaccurate."

She smiles walks off.

“Ten galleons if you get in her pants, HJ.”

“I think I have enough problems right now without having to worry about her, her curse happy bodyguards, her Death Eater headmaster, and most importantly her doting, but clearly homicidal grandfather. Isn't my life entertaining enough for you as it is? How much more do you need?”

“Oh it's interesting all right, HJ, there's action, mystery, and drama, but where's the comedy and the romance? I want the whole fucking package! I demand entertainment! Dance for me you hairless, sperm burping, monkey!”

Hat embarks on a fit of maniacal laughter that only it is capable of. I remove the blasted thing from my head.

With only the tournament officials, heads of the schools, Athena, and Fudge left, Dumbledore returns from his private area adjoining the office and addresses me. “I commend you, Harry. Again you proved to be the capable wizard. I apologize that I was only able to send Fawkes to your aid, but in my defense, I had to see to the safety of the audience. The needs of the many most often outweigh the needs of the one.”

I wonder if he's seen the Star Trek movies. Either way, he's had a rough day. There's no reason to add to it. “No apology necessary, sir. Summoning Fawkes was the best solution.”

“Indeed, my familiar seems to be quite smitten with you. I'm beginning to wonder if Fawkes is already scouting for my replacement. I am certain it could do worse, but less sure that it could do better.”

I didn't really need the ego boost, but hell, I'll take it. “Thank you, but I'm fairly certain Hedwig would be jealous, so let's hope that doesn't occur for a long, long time.” Besides, where exactly would Fawkes fit in my growing menagerie of faithful owl, psychotic house-elf, and foul mouthed Sorting Hat? If it grows any larger, I'll have to recruit a centaur to carry them.

Fudge gives me a 'fatherly' smile, "Don't forget Harry that soon we'll correct the oversight of awarding you that Order of Merlin you so richly deserve. In light of today's events, it's tempting to call a special session of the Wizengamot to see if we should change the third class to a second class. You are a credit to your school and your country. People are saying good things about you."

I give polite thanks knowing that if Fudge does it, it will be mostly just to distract the masses with the good while downplaying the bad. Politics is, after all, forty seven percent smoke, forty seven percent mirrors, and six percent actual substance – even if that substance is horse shit, but what do I know?

The other four make their way into the spacious room, eyeing all the knickknacks and finding a seat. All the other officials find their way in as well.

Dumbledore begins, "Now that we have dealt with the pressing matters, we need to address how to properly evaluate the interrupted task. It is becoming an unfortunate theme of this tournament. Let us hope that this is not how history remembers it."

Karkaroff starts, "I believe we should reschedule the task and start fresh."

Typical, since his champions finished in third and fourth place, he wants more time to prepare them.

Amos Diggory having settled into Crouch Senior's position looks ill at ease with the idea of subjecting his son to the dementors again. "Part of the task was the element of surprise and the ideal of facing the unknown. Without it, it's somewhat lackluster. The concessions for security if we were to redo it would also be a nightmare.

"Then we should discard this task and replace it with one of the others."

Maxime shakes her finger at Karkaroff, "Would you be singing the same tune, Igor, if either of your students was still in the competition when the incident happened?"

Dumbledore sighs loudly, "There has been a spate of petty bickering in this office as of late. I did not support the return of the dementors to the grounds of this school and if anyone, even you Cornelius, believes that there will be a third opportunity for the dementors of Azkaban to inflict suffering and injury on a student here, they are mistaken to the point of being delusional."

"See, even Albus agrees that the task should be discarded!"

"No, I most certainly did not. The task will not be redone, but I think the performance should be judged as it stood when the incident happened. Both Miss Delacour and Mr. Potter were still participating, therefore I propose that the points for first and second place be combined and split evenly between the two giving each of them eight. Miss Manos receives the four points for a clear third place finish and so on."

I can see the wheels turning in Karkaroff's head as he calculates where that places his champions. Maxime is nodding at Dumbledore. The former Death Eater knows that he won't win, so he concedes.

"Good, it is settled. Now ..."

"Non, I object." Fleur's voice interrupts. It's the first time I've ever seen Maxime look at her harshly.

"What now?" Karkaroff growls.

I'm somewhat wondering what Fleur is up to. She looks unusually nervous. "When the interruption happened, he stepped forward. I did not. Therefore, in the interests of fair play, I concede first place to him and am willing to accept second place. My own personal honor would be offended if Monsieur Potter were slighted for a third consecutive time."

Well knock me over with a feather! I sure hadn't expected that to come out of her mouth. Dumbledore smiles, "Well spoken Miss Delacour. Speaking for Hogwarts, I have no objection to your solution. Olympe?"

"I accede to her wishes." Funny, she doesn't sound happy about it.

"Igor?"

"At this point Albus, I couldn't care less."

"Very well, it is settled. Congratulations to you, Harry and to you as well, Miss Delacour. What you gave up in points, I suspect you will more than recoup in things that matter far more than this contest. We will release the results in the morning. It has been a trying day and I wish all of you a restful evening."

I stand to leave, but Dumbledore stops me. "Harry, may I trouble you and your advisor for a few minutes more in private?"

Shrugging, I watch the rest leave. Aimee mouths a quick thank you to me. Dumbledore waits until the last one leaves before addressing the Hat and me. "This has little to do with today's incident, but I would like a personal favor."

"What can I do for you, sir?"

"I would like you to end your personal crusade against Professor Snape. Your letter was received by the Board of Governors and I have been fielding their owls for the last week. I spotted the Sorting Hat's influence in your writing, unless of course you are prone to using phrases such as, 'In summary, it is my opinion that a steaming pile of hippogriff shit could conduct itself with more decorum than the esteemed Severus Snape.' A most interesting visual, Harry. Do I even need to mention the badges?"

I nod at the Hat, who smiles smugly. "With all due respect, why should I? Did you have the same discussion with Snape before he executed his little private vendetta against Remus Lupin?"

The Headmaster nods. "Words were exchanged on multiple occasions throughout the year. Still, Remus chose on his own accord to resign. I was more than willing to take up his banner."

Remus did the noble thing, which is typical of him. A decent guy all around except when it came to Lily Potter. "Let me guess, Snape used the student safety issue to cover for his petty vengeance? Well, I can go that route too with what substances he's keeping in his obviously unsecure cabinets. Funny, I don't see him preparing to fall on his sword like Remus did. He'll let you risk your career to save his sorry murdering arse."

"You oversimplify my position. With today's unfortunate incident, I will have a difficult enough time keeping Hagrid employed here as it is without fighting them on a second front. Poppy has reported that you are quite capable in the brewing art. I can and will support your request to hire a private tutor for next year and beyond. If none can be found, I may consider giving you personal instruction. Furthermore, I am weighing the options for the next year."

"What are you thinking about?"

"I'll speak plainly because you are deserving of an answer. I will have Severus teach only the NEWT level courses. With the additional funds graciously provided by Minister Fudge after the incident with Crouch, I can employ a second teacher for the first through fifth years. Indeed, he has his own demons, but with the forces of darkness stirring, I fear I will need his services again."

I weigh my own options. Dumbledore is clearly planning on going to the mat for the greasy bastard because he might need his spy again. I get his backing for private tutoring. It's a victory for me, but I won't let it go that easily. "Fine, I'll drop it on one condition. He steps down as Head of Slytherin as well. Wait, before you say I'm being petty, hear me out. The Heads need to be role models and three out of four are. Get rid of the one that isn't."

"Let me ponder this Harry."

"Ponder it. Do what you need to do. In fact, do it with the consensus of the other three Heads, but if they all agree he should step aside, you should do it." I leave off the idea that when I let it slip that I'm the one forcing old Snivellus to step down, there's no way in hell he's going to do it, but by then Dumbledore will have had to listen to the

other three Heads and he'll be faced with his needs of the many versus needs of the one problem all over again. Following that assessment, maybe this time Spock will stay dead this time.

"Your idea has merit. Minerva, Pomona, and Filius have as much stake in the operations of this school as I do. I will take it up with them and get their perspective. In the meantime, I have decided on your request concerning Mr. Longbottom. Ask him to come to my office tomorrow and I will explain what really happened with the Death Eater impersonating Alastor and secure his own vow. Now, off to bed with you lad. We've both had a long and difficult day and deserve the comforts that a good night's rest will afford."

I pick up the Hat and head out the door and down the steps. I start to comment to it how it was unusually quiet, missing the opportunity to tear into Dumbledore. Then I realize there is someone at the end of the corridor. Fleur is standing at the painting of Barnabas the Barmy studying the details. The noise of the Gargoyle moving alerts her.

"Hello, Fleur. I appreciate what you did back there. It wasn't necessary, but thanks anyway."

She addresses me in English. "I did not realize that you would be so long with your Headmaster. I merely wanted to say that when you first became involved in this tournament that I considered you to be an annoyance at best and feared that in accommodating you, they would turn this contest into a joke."

"It may already be a joke, but I'm certainly not laughing."

"True, but I now know who my real competition is. Make no mistake, Harry Potter, I plan on winning this, but I want my victory to be as you say, fair and square."

I smile good naturedly at her. "Well, in that case, enjoy your narrow lead Fleur. I guess I should say, enjoy it while it lasts."

"We shall see. Goodnight, Harry."

I start off towards the entrance to Gryffindor tower. Donning the Hat, it immediately says, "Fifty galleons if you can get in her pants by the end of winter break."

"I might take you up on that one, Hat."

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"So, would you care for some hair restorative, or are you looking to keep the eyebrowless look? I've got some up in my dorm." Hermione needles me. I'm looking at myself in a mirror the following morning and she and Ron are trying to pry all the juicy information about last night.

Fawkes' fireball did a number on my hair and eyebrows. "Clever Hermione. I'll make you a trade. You grow back my eyebrow and patch my hair and I'll fix those front teeth of yours."

Her eyes open wide and she crosses her arms. "There's nothing wrong with my teeth!"

"In all the years I've known you. You smile. You don't grin. You never grin."

She turns slightly away, "I asked my parents. They said I should be happy with the way I am. Since they're dentists, they'll notice."

I come out of the bathroom and stand in front of her. "Well, since we're staying here for the holidays, they're not going to see you until June. People change in almost ten months. Cut your hair short or go blonde and they'll be so caught up in that that they won't notice a little alteration to the mouth. If and when they do, just tell them that you're not allowed to do magic outside of school, so you'll have to wait until fifth year to change them back. After that, put your foot down and be a rebellious teenager for once in your life. Tell them that you're keeping them and that's final! Or tell them that I did it for you for a Christmas present and if you change them back, it'll make me sad."

She's flushed with a bit of embarrassment and probably a touch of anger. "You're impossible."

“Impossible not to adore, maybe. However, I’m also right and you know it.”

Ron breaks in and gives her some time to mull it over, “Speaking of using magic to fix things Harry, you’re brilliant at Transfiguration. Think you can do anything with those awful dress robes Mum sent me?”

He and I are still on somewhat shaky ground, but we’re trying to get back into being good friends again. “It’d only be temporary. For what it’s worth, you’re better off torching them and just starting with a base set of school robes and sprucing them up a tad. It’s not too late to order some out of a catalog. I’ll spot you the coin. Call it a Christmas gift.”

“You gave me those Omnis before the term began.”

“Oh right, early birthday gift then or you learn the charm to Transfigure your robes and I’ll get you something else.”

“Think you can teach me the steps to Transfigure it? A bloke buying another bloke a set of robes he’s only going to wear once is just stupid.”

This naturally sets off Hermione. “Ron, having a presentable set of dress robes might come in handy down the road. Honestly!”

“Well, in that case, Hermione can buy them for your birthday. While we’re on the topic of this Yule Ball thing next month, I have to have a date for it. Hermione, are you busy?”

She looks surprised, “I’ve already got a date. Sorry Harry.”

“Oh, you and Ron going as a couple?”

Ron looks gobsmacked. “Err, this is the first I’ve heard of it too. It’s not me.”

Hermione's mood does a quick one eighty. "For your information, I am a girl and as such, other boys might just find me attractive!"

I can't resist. "Even with those teeth?"

"Arrgh!"

I haven't coaxed a frustrated growl out of her since back when I was just plain old Harry. I'd almost forgotten how fun it could be. "Oh relax, I was taking the mickey out of you. Besides, we've already decided that we're going to fix the teeth."

"We most certainly did not!"

"Yes we did. You're just going to wait a day before telling me to go ahead and do it. This way, we cut out the whole waiting a day part."

Ron laughs, "I've been missing you in Divination, mate. Mind if I use that one as everyday evidence of the Inner Eye?"

"Arrgh! That's it! I'm going to go get the hair restoring potion. I might just add some itching powder too if you keep this up." She stomps out of the room slamming it shut.

Ron looks over grinning. "Think she'd use the itching powder?"

"Nah, she never tells you what she's mischievously going to do and then does it. Besides, she doesn't have itching powder. This is Hermione we're talking about."

"True, so who do you think she's taking to this dance thing?"

"I dunno. So, were you going to ask her?"

"Maybe, I hadn't really given it much thought. I mean, it's just a dance. Right? It'd kinda be weird, if you know what I mean. Of course, now I have to ask someone. We'll have to ask someone soon, before all the good ones get taken."

“Ron, it’s never just a dance to a teenaged witch. Trust me on this one.”

“Alright then, who are you going to take?”

I look over at the Hat sitting on my bed behind the silencing charms. The Yule Ball is on the twenty-fourth. That’s well before the end of the winter break. “I think I’ll ask Delacour.”

“Good luck with that, mate. People are already asking her from what I hear.”

--

I spend the next few days scoping out Fleur’s body language to maximize my chances of success. There’s a tension in the air after the bloody aftermath of the assassination attempt. Many people who couldn’t see a Thestral before should have no problem now. Naturally, I had to give an interview to Rita. That went as well as can be predicted. Her headline the next morning was “Who Will Protect Our Champions?” Considering the short leash they have her on, it was pretty brazen of her, but that’s her problem.

My recent problems include the following: a pair of melted cauldrons in my private lab, the last in rather spectacular fashion causing a needless delay, Melinda opting out of any further “tutoring” sessions, and Neville. Since his meeting with Dumbledore he’s been rather skittish around me. Maybe having Dumbledore tell him was a bad idea. My gut says confront him, make him spit it out, and take the bull by the proverbial horns. My head says he’s a shy fourteen year old kid who probably needs time to digest it.

For a change my head wins. I’ll give him a few more days to sort it out.

As for Fleur, like clockwork there is a bloke or sometimes two at every meal who conjures up the courage and heads over to her table. Her “femme fatale” cohorts give icy glares at them, which will occasionally stop one who isn’t fully bedazzled by her, but most walk right up with a single mindedness. They try and strike up a

conversation, sometimes getting a few words out of her, but most often they leave after running on at the mouth for a few minutes.

"So, are you really going to try it, Harry?" Ron part asks and part demands.

"In a minute, let her eat some of her meal. So, do you want to come along and see how it's done?"

Ron looks uncomfortable. Then again, he is a fourteen year old boy faced with the prospects of asking a girl out for the first time in his life. "Uh ... sure ... I guess."

I let Fleur eat uninterrupted for ten minutes, while I dust off that old Potter charm. James Potter's record was impressive, but he did go down in flames on more than one occasion, though getting him to admit that fact was another story altogether. Everything I've learned about her says, I should just simply ask. If she says no, I should just play it off and not stand there looking like an idiot. I've had enough practice doing that in this lifetime.

With the lunch period drawing to a close, the Beauxbaton table begins to empty. It's now or never. "C'mon mate."

Ron follows me and I walk up to behind Fleur and Aimee, looking at the questioning glares of the witches serving as Fleur's first line of defense. Clearly, they aren't certain what to make of Harry James Potter.

Join the club. I'm making it up as I go along. Aimee turns and looks at me with an arched eyebrow and a slight grin on her face.

As Fleur turns around, I discover my error. Ron loudly says, "Would you please go to the ball with me? I'm begging you ... please?"

Fleur doesn't even turn. She clucks her tongue against the roof of her mouth and sighs. "Since I don't know the sound of your voice, I'm guessing we've never exchanged words. The fact that you're coming over here at the last second means that you've spent all lunch

working up the nerve and the best you can do is beg. Go far away and leave me alone."

Poor Ron's flummoxed, trying to figure out what to say next. Aimee nudges Fleur and she finally turns around wiping her lips with a napkin. "Oh, you are William's leetle brother. Did you honestly believe I would go with you?"

His mouth is moving, but no words are coming out. I'd almost forgotten what a cold hearted wench she can be in public. Fleur looks away from Ron and notices me.

She appraises me and I meet her gaze. "Well Harry?"

Good question. My eyes flick over to Ron. He's more than crushed. I make a snap decision zig when I should zag. "Ron probably didn't mean to ask you. He was just overcome by your aura. Besides, that'd really piss off Bill if you did take him up on it. Me, I was trying to show him how to properly ask a pretty witch to this Yule Ball."

Fleur tilts her head in amusement. "And just how does Harry Potter ask a witch to this dance?"

I look up at the ceiling and scratch my chin in thought and switch to French. "Well, I would tell her how much she has impressed me since I first met her. I would mention that she is gracious and supportive to her friends, has an intriguing sense of humor, and does not want for brains, talent, or, of course, beauty."

Fleur smiles, "That is very well said. It's a little early for me to make a decision, but I will certainly keep you in mind."

Reaching for my best "surprised" face, I reply, "Oh, my apologies, Fleur. I didn't mean to give you that impression. I'll certainly try to keep a space in my dance card open for you, but I was actually talking about Aimee. So Miss Beaucourt, do you have an escort to this dance yet, or may I have that honor?"

Aimee's jaw drops as Fleur flushes to match Ron's embarrassment. Several of the witches actually gasp. I would say the scene is

priceless, but it is going to cost me fifty galleons as soon as Hat hears about it. I consider it money well spent, if that's what it takes to knock Frosty the snow bitch down a peg or two. Let's see how Fleur handles the unexpected Bludger.

"Do you need an answer right now?" Aimee stammers.

I shake my head. "No, but before the staff duels this coming weekend would be appreciated. Naturally, I don't want you to think that I'll be taking it easy on you. See you around."

I lead the still shocked Ron away with an inner grin threatening to bust out on my face. Sometimes, it's good to be me.

--

As promised, it's the end of the month and here's the new chapter I guaranteed. Of course, you folks will be clamoring for another update. Next up, the staff duels, the puzzle room, and that pesky Yule Ball. For those of you wondering what the point standings are as of this moment. Fleur - 19 points, HJ - 15 points, Krum - 10 points, Athena - 7 points, Cedric - 5 points, and Aimee - 4 points.

Visit my profile for the link where you can listen to my original short story (for free). Let me know what you think of it. As always discussion on Darklordpotter and Fanficaauthors.

Disclaimer – Just another fanfic

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Acknowledgements – Thanks as always to the folks at Alpha Fight Club for their help with this chapter. My beta's haven't had a chop on this chapter yet, so all errors are on me. I'll post an edited version when I get it back, but you folks have waited long enough.

Chapter 15 – Code of the Marauders

Aimee finds me in the corridor a few hours after dinner finished. "You realize Fleur is quite angry at your stunt."

I put on my "confused" face and lean back against the masonry. "I have no idea what you are talking about."

She scoffs at me and I realize that Aimee is rather attractive when she's perturbed. "Of course you don't. We both know you were going to ask her. Don't bother denying it."

"I changed my mind. Fortunately, I don't fall to pieces around her and have that luxury."

"Yes, but why? Because of your friend?"

Ron was rather embarrassed when he came back to his senses. "Partly yes, but mostly I realized that, although she isn't as cold towards me in private as she used to be, we'd be out in public together. Call me selfish, but I would prefer to enjoy my night out with an attractive witch who possesses a pleasant disposition, than one who hates the spotlight and attention probably as much as I do."

My words have Miss Beaucourt thinking. "You do know that I have a boyfriend?"

"No, I didn't." With her always around Fleur, I had assumed she was unattached. "So, I guess your answer is no."

"Stephan is an apprentice to an Enchanter in the Azores. He graduated from Beauxbatons last year."

"Well, I look forward to meeting him." I start to leave, but her hand stops me.

"Stephan's master is very strict. He is not allowed to leave for the first two years, even to vacation with his parents."

I whistle, "Not even to see his girlfriend compete in the first Triwizard Tournament in over four hundred years? Tell me, does he write you often or called you on the Floo?"

"That's none of your business!" she snaps back, quickly – a bit too quickly.

"Oh dear, I seem to have touched a nerve. Perhaps a picture of you and I having a lovely evening will encourage him to pick up a quill or a pinch of Floo powder."

Aimee gives me a rather sour look. "And what makes you think he would be jealous of you?"

I grin, "The shortest answer is four words – I am Harry Potter. Three if it's 'I'm Harry Potter,' or if you'd like it in your tongue, je m'appelle Harry Potter. The photograph I mentioned would also be attached to an issue of Teen Witch Weekly written by my dear friend, Penelope Clearwater. It would likely include another picture of me receiving an Order of Merlin as well. If you prefer, you could send him any of the other rags. They'll be overflowing with speculation by this time tomorrow – actually less, since everyone knows I asked you. I'll wager a galleon that it makes the Prophet tomorrow."

She laughs, "I believe you are becoming more dangerous with each passing second, Harry."

"You'll find that I am full of surprises. So, are you going to be my date for this occasion or do I need to ask someone else?"

"Most will suspect that I am trying to take advantage of you, but I am worried that I need to stay on guard from your schemes. Very well, I accept your invitation, Harry, though Fleur will likely stop speaking to me for several days."

"Is she that angry?" The image of an enraged Fleur Delacour amuses me.

"Quite. It's been years since she's called me 'Aimee Nicolette' and I've heard it three times this afternoon!"

"It's a very pretty name."

"Thank you. Well, I must be going. I have to get to my laboratory. There are things that must be done; I suspect you know that all too well."

I think I know what she's referring to. "Heard about the explosions, did you? It was only a minor setback, I promise. You know, there's still a bit of light left. A walk by the lake would certainly get those rumors simmering..."

She rolls her eyes, but fails to hide the smile on her face, "I will pass this time, Harry, but thank you for the offer."

I watch Aimee walk away with an amused smile on my face while weighing my chances with her. She looks back right before turning the corner and heading for the staircase, probably wondering what she's gotten herself into.

My dear, you have no idea.

--

Oliver Wood smiles at me, twirling a staff with a gleeful expression on his face. "Your size and speed do give you a couple of advantages, HJ."

Twenty minutes of getting my arse handed to me by my sparring partner hasn't improved my sense of humor. "What's that?"

"You're short, so you don't have very far to fall and you're fast, so it'll be over quickly." He laughs and launches another assault as I try to dredge up JP's rather limited skills with these blasted things. Before people could just kip on over to Ollivander's they either made their own wands or many settled for staves. Many pureblood families to this day use them to try to sniff out magical ability in youngsters. JP's parents put the staves away shortly after he started showing his talents.

Long ago, Hermione seemed to be under the impression that a staff would be mighty and powerful. Crude and inefficient would be more like it. The difference between the wand and a staff are not the difference between a pistol and a rifle; it is more like a pistol and an early musket. This four foot hunk of holly in my hands is damn near useless. Honestly, something this long should have bristles at the end and someone riding it!

Yeah, I'm pretty screwed in this event. At least no one can cheat and hurt my score here. I'm going to lose fair and square.

The Hat lends its own brand of cheerfulness, "Good one, HJ! Blocking with your head is a winning tactic for certain! Wood! Hit him in the crotch and see if that gives him any incentive to do better."

"I'll get my wand, Ollie!" I warn.

I'd called on Ollie, because he tried to get a staff dueling club here at Hogwarts. He's one of those rare spell casters that really like athletics. Puddlemere's training facilities include, among other things, a racquetball court. Ollie dominates that as well, so, I figured he'd be good with a staff.

I stand corrected. He's not only good; he's great and way too much for me. I might as well have called out Hagrid. Alright, let's see if I can channel some magic through this wretched thing! I hop backwards to give myself some space, there's only about twenty crude spells that can be cast with a staff. I choose a disarming spell.

"Exarmoare!" The feeble yellow beam sputters on Ollie's "Declino." He didn't have to cast it; he was just looking for an excuse to use that rudimentary shield.

"Maybe your best strategy is to dodge and take blows until their arms tire!" Hat cackles. When Ollie joins him, I send an irritated, wandless banisher his way and watch the Keeper dive out of the way.

Wood gawks at my casual display of force. "Wow, you're getting better! Still, temper, temper there HJ. None of that during the competition, or you'll get a disqualification. Now what's this I hear about you and the seventh year French Champion?"

"She's nice. Her boyfriend isn't going to be in town." Hat starts laughing about the money I'll owe it.

Wood launches a quick series of feints that I barely parry. "Playing the other man, I see. Well it'd be tempting to see if I could take this pretty bird away from you as well, but one's my limit."

"More like Penny already owns your stones!" I move in and try to sweep his feet, only to be turned away as easily as my earlier spell. He answers with a quick Fumeous and sprays a small jet of smoke into my face. I back away hacking and coughing. This whole episode is one long, painful lesson in my limitations.

"Nah, but she does handle them rather nicely. By the way, learn that one, HJ. Watch for a person to take a deep breath before they do it. If you use it, follow up quickly and try to drive them off the platform. You'll need every trick you can get in this one."

"Thanks for the vote of confidence."

Ollie calls for a break. The Hat immediately calls us "Pussies."

Both of us have gotten pretty adept at ignoring the thing. Ollie says, "Considering some people already think you're the next Merlin, I wouldn't waste much time worrying about losing a few archaic staff duels."

I scuff my shoes on the mats we've been practicing on, "I don't like to lose."

He shrugs his shoulders. "Show me someone who does. Think your date likes being in last place in the competition? Yeah, didn't think so. My advice is, laugh the whole thing off. All of them are at least three years older than that body of yours. Just focus on giving a good show and maybe even ham it up a bit even when you're getting the snot beaten out of you up there. I don't think anyone's going to forget you going toe to toe with those Dementors anytime soon."

"Yeah, I should just play it off like whenever the Marauders got caught in a prank. They'd just have a good chuckle and brag about who failed with the most style."

"That's the spirit – victory in defeat! Here why don't you put some salve on that cheek? That looks pretty nasty. Let's call it a day."

"Scared, I'll injure you?"

He smiles, "Nope, I'm going to take Penny out to a nice restaurant and a few hours later, I'm going to shag her rotten. What's on your schedule for tonight?"

Amidst the laughter of a certain magical artifact, I reply, "You're a bastard, Ollie."

He tries, but fails to look hurt. "I know. It's part of my charm. I'll come back for one more session, but in the meantime try and practice with someone else to get a feel for different styles."

"Yeah, I'll do that. See you later, mate. Hope Penny gives you blueballs."

--

"I know, I am being childish ... the whole thing is silly. I really should apologize to Aimee for my behavior. Why shouldn't she go with him? Honestly, he is a step up from Stephan, even if he is arrogant and egotistical."

I shuffle on my hooves and listen with amusement to Fleur vent about this annoying wizard she knows. This is quickly becoming my guiltiest of pleasures. In some respects, she was forced to mature much too quickly to deal with the inordinate amount of attention she receives, but her expertise is dealing out the rejection and not being on the receiving end. Oh, the tangled web we weave! I suppose this is the drama and humor the Hat was asking for earlier.

"What do you think, Monsieur Pronghorn?"

Wondering what she would do if I transformed back, I look away from her and at the empty spot where Aimee was during my last visit.

"Yes, it is lonely without her and with Gabrielle back in France until the Holidays; I should make amends with my best friend. After all, she is not to blame for his actions."

Oh, that doesn't sound good. She's got an unhealthy, at least for me, gleam in her eye. "He didn't particularly care for William. Perhaps, I should give him another try."

Wow! I really did get under her skin. Her and Bill at the Yule Ball? Maybe I could get Skeeter to do an expose – Bill Weasley Cursebreaker and Cradle Robber. It has a nice ring to it.

Fleur looks hot ... I mean thoughtful, while contemplating her revenge on me. I'm guessing that if she knew who Monsieur Pronghorn really was there would be curses exchanged.

"I know he hates that little Malfoy scion, but fortunately for him, I can't stand the little pig as well." She's smacking the water in irritation.

Well, she looks less hot just for entertaining the idea of Draco. I spend a moment to consider what they would look like as a couple and come up with a pair of uptight, prissy bitches. I simply must tell Padfoot about all of this. I can't wait to hear him howling in laughter. Hoping to show my disapproval, I turn and sniff the berries in the bushes. They're starting to get old and withered. Sadly, I can't snack and perv at the same time.

"I have asked Gabrielle to bring back some dried fruit from our chateau when she returns. I'll also bring some items from Hogwart's tables with me. Though, you shouldn't get me started on the topic of English cooking. They might as well ladle grease and fat directly into their mouths! When they do try to eat something healthy, like fish, they slather it in batter to the point that it's unrecognizable!"

On behalf of all my countrymen and women, I should take offense. I contemplate giving her grotto the old "deer droppings" treatment, but I notice the wind shifting and with it comes the smell I've been smelling as of late. The Dragons Ron warned me about are to the east of us. The scent would be faint to a human.

Fleur senses my change, "What is it?"

I make a pronounced effort to show her my nostrils flaring.

"You smell something?" She lifts her wand to her nose and casts a temporary augmentation charm. There's the added bonus of watching her chest heave while she inhales deeply.

"It smells like ... Dragon! There's a Dragon in the forest?"

I nod and paw my right front hoof into the ground six times. Her eyes get a little bigger. "Six dragons! Oh, rest easy Monsieur Pronghorn, I believe they are here for this contest I am participating in. They aren't your problem, they are mine."

Actually Fleur they're mine too, but you don't need to know that.

I laugh internally when she smacks the water with both hands and exclaims, "I know just who I should take. I have the perfect person. I shall ask Viktor Krum."

Yeah, that'll be pretty annoying. I might have to scratch her from the dance card. Still, in a way, I'm flattered. My topless friend over there is going to an awful lot of trouble just to get back at little old me. Obsess much, Fleur?

"Maybe I should just take you, Monsieur Pronghorn. You are, by far, the noblest creature I have encountered."

Okay, she's hot again.

"It looks as if our time is up for today. My days are pretty full right now with this tournament. We have to duel with staves this coming weekend and I need all the practice that I can get. However, four days from now will be Sunday afternoon and if you come back both I and Aimee shall be here, Monsieur Pronghorn."

I nod at her, taking in the view as she dries off with her wand and counting the days until I win that pensieve. I know one of the first memories, or is that mammaries, I'll be viewing.

"Will you wish me luck?" she asks donning her robe.

I walk over to her. Fleur leans over and wraps her arm around my neck. She gives me a kiss on top of my head. I break away and head out, wanting to make a clean getaway, while she recalls her magical grotto back into the necklace. I'm barely a hundred feet beyond the perimeter when I hear a shout and see shapes moving in the forest.

"Petrificus Totalus!"

I jump and kick on the speed as the spell arcs towards me. A stunner joins it as I accelerate. I change direction and pour on the speed. One small problem, I can't out run apparition. I hear the pops and double back as more spells chase me. I sprint towards Fleur's wards. If they're still up I'll make it to safety. Another pop and someone appears just to my left. His leg locker clips me and my hind legs snap together. I tumble to the ground painfully. He puts me in a full body bind. Shit! I start focusing my energy. I should be able to break it in a minute. At the same time, I see two shapes approaching me.

For a moment, I fear they're Death Eaters, but thankfully, it's just a pair of wizards. "Is it an elk?"

"I don't think so Charlie. I'd thought it was a deer, but the horns are all wrong."

Charlie! That doesn't sound good. He's a Dragon Handler and right now, I'm just a big old hunk of paralyzed meat. Guess who doesn't want to be Dragon chow?

"I guess it doesn't really matter, Lyle. Which one do you want to feed it too? The Horntail?"

I'm almost free of the hex. My plan is to bolt and put this speed of mine to good use. I can revert and Apparate if need be.

"What are you doing?" I hear Fleur practically scream.

"Lower your wand, miss. You know the Forbidden forest is out of bounds to students, even the foreign visitors."

"What are you doing with this animal?"

"That's none of your business miss. Now move along before we report you."

"You both stink of Dragons! You're going to feed him to a Dragon!" Fleur launches into a tirade of French vulgarity that I hadn't thought her capable of. She must still have the charm in effect to smell it. I finally break the hex holding me hostage, but decide to remain still and see how this plays out.

"Bugger! What do we do now?" Charlie mutters.

"I say we Oblivate her." His partner whispers.

"Lyle! No!"

Charlie's protest falls on deaf ears. When the wands start to come out I bolt upright and slam sideways into Charlie Weasley knocking him down to the ground. The other bloke tries the same curse he snagged me with, but Fleur's ready for him. She reflects it back at him and sends a quick stunner that catches the Dragon Handler trying to dodge his own spell.

With my expanded field of vision, I get a look at an avenging angel charging towards us as Charlie struggles with my weight and to find his wand on the ground. She summons that wand and the stunned wizards as well.

"Do you know who I am? My father is the foreign minister of my country, you English dog!"

Since Fleur is now in control, I get up again and walk over next to her while Charlie starts sputtering, "This was all just a misunderstanding. No one's supposed to know about the Dragons in the forest. My partner just got a little carried away and over reacted."

"Do the words assault and international incident mean anything to you?" Fleur growls.

"Whoa, whoa, whoa! Easy there miss, I'm sorry I didn't catch your name."

"Fleur Delacour."

Charlie replies, "Oh wait. You know my brother, Bill Weasley."

Fleur's answer is slow, "Yes, I know William. What of it?"

"Look, we were just out looking for some food for the Dragons you already seem to know about. We found this animal and figured it was a good catch. Why don't we all go up to the castle and let Professor Dumbledore explain this."

Fleur relaxes, "Very well, I will keep both of your wands. For the record, this is Monsieur Pronghorn. He is my friend and under my protection. You will tell the others at your camp that my friend is not to be put on the menu for one of your beasts. If that were to happen, Charlie Weasley, I will hold you personally responsible. Do I make myself clear?"

"Crystal," Charlie answers with a noticeable gulp.

Fleur turns to address me, "I am sorry for the actions of these other humans. They are English and therefore idiots. You will need to be more careful in these woods."

"It understands you?" Charlie asks as she pats me on my head.

"Yes. I would venture that he is more intelligent than either of you two. Now, I am going to revive your companion and the three of us will go see Professor Dumbledore."

I stay close enough to make certain that Lyle doesn't try anything funny when she wakes him up. At the edge of the forest, I stop and watch the three of them go. Good thing I'm not on Fleur's bad side.

Oh wait, technically I am.

--

"Hey Neville, got a moment?"

"Sure Harry. What do you need?"

"I need someone to practice staff dueling. Have you ever done it?"

He looks a little uncomfortable. "Grams still had me doing it before second year."

I pretend that I don't get the stigma associated with that and make a mental note to one day let Augusta Longbottom know in no uncertain terms what Frank and Alice would tell her if they could.

"That's great, because I really need the help. Will you?" He agrees and follows me. Neville, like Ron and Dean, are putting on the inches while Seamus and I seemed to have hit a brick wall. I'm sure Ron knows a bit about staves as well, but I figured this'd give me a good chance to clear the air with Neville. He's been quiet ever since he spoke to Professor Dumbledore.

I lead him down to the spare classroom that Ollie beat the snot out of me in. I hand him an oak staff that I had requested knowing what his

wand's base material is made from. He seems pretty comfortable with it.

While no one is going to mistake Neville for Oliver Wood anytime soon, he's definitely better than I am.

"I have to admit, Neville, you're pretty good at this."

"Thanks Harry!" It actually gets a grin out of him.

I try Ollie's smoke maneuver, but Neville turns me aside without getting much in his face. "How far away could you see that coming? All the way from Hogsmeade?"

My sparring partner responds with a "stick flash" meant to disorient me. I see a few spots and fall back on the defensive. At least my speed is counting for something with him. As long as my competitors are closer to Neville than Ollie, I might have some hope.

Of course, everyone knows "hope" is a four letter word. Besides, I have a more pressing interest that requires my attention. "So, are you okay with what Dumbledore told you? You've been out of sort ever since then. Look, I know that Crouch bastard was a piece of work, I'd rather not have killed him ..."

He stops and lowers his staff, "It's not that Harry. I told Dumbledore that we went to Diagon Alley back in October. It just kind of slipped out while we were talking."

I think it over for a moment, "You told him about you visiting your folks and getting a proper wand, right?"

"Well, yeah, but as soon as I said it I realized that you might get in trouble."

Dumbledore has that seeing the good in everyone "flaw" that Hat commented on during the ruckus at the Dementor challenge. "It's fine mate. It was always your story to tell. Compared to most of the things I've run into this year, a scolding from the Headmaster is the least of my worries."

Even so, I know that Dumbledore is starting to keep tabs on me in his own subtle way. I'll have to be more wary.

Neville looks like the weight of the world was just lifted off his shoulders and we resume beating each other with sticks like a bunch of fools. Let's see if I can use a bit of distraction on him. "So who are you going to ask to this dance?"

It's cheap and shameful of me, but I catch him off guard. Now if my competitors are shy, nervous types I should be fine.

"I dunno," he replies oblivious to my subterfuge.

"What about Ginny?" I'm probably tempting fate again, but they seem like a good pair.

"Maybe, but I think she's already going with that Corner bloke."

"Really? They got back together?" I hadn't heard about that, but in all honesty, I've been busy. "Good on him." Internally, I decided, "Good luck to him" might be a better fit.

"Well, who have you got your eyes on?"

The poor kid just keeps getting redder. "I'm not sure I even want to go to this."

"Well Neville, there's plenty of third years that would love to go. What about that Demelza girl in Ginny's year. She's a pretty enough bird and I bet she'd love to go."

Actually, Robbins is a bit on the plain side, but from my perspective, most of the girls in this school fit that description. Still, Robbins has more potential than most thirteen year olds in Gryffindor. A year or two down the line, Neville might be glad he asked her.

"You think I should ask her?"

I shrug my shoulders, "I think you should ask the person you want to ask? How about Parvati?"

"Ron asked her yesterday."

Definitely didn't see that coming. "Well, I'm clearly out of the loop. What about outside our house? Any pretty Puff or Claw you have your eyes on? Oh come on Neville, it's just me and you here so cut the crap. Who do you want to ask?"

He looks sheepish and finally blurts out, "Hannah Abbott."

"Not a bad choice, if she's still available. Here's the thing, girls travel in packs. She always has Susan, Megan, and Sally-Anne around her, so here's what we're going to do. I can distract the other three while you ask Hannah."

I guess this means I have to show my face in Herbology class tomorrow. Sprout will probably wonder who the new student is. JP never really cared for it. HP was only mildly interested because of all the gardening Petunia made him do. Given all that and the fact that I can skiv off any class without consequence, it's no surprise that I can't really muster any real enthusiasm for the course.

--

"Honestly, if it wasn't for Neville here, I wouldn't stand a chance this weekend. You think he's brilliant with plants, you should see him with a staff!"

The four Hufflepuff girls are hanging on my words and regarding Neville with calculating looks.

Megan smiles, "Well, we'll be pulling for you, except against Cedric of course."

"I don't think you have to worry. He's got the right build for this event. It'll be either him or Krum that wins the majority. I'm just hoping to get a few wins."

I let them ask a few more questions before changing the subject. “So Susan, how are you doing after your run in with those assassins?”

She sighs, “It was the scariest thing I’ve ever experienced. Looking back, I know they weren’t going to hurt me, but even so it’s been an ordeal that I hope to put in the past.”

“Good on you. I’m sorry to hear that it cost your Aunt her job though. She’s always been kind to me.” Fudge got his pound of flesh and Amelia Bones was sacked the other day. He elevated that Scrimgeour bloke in her place until he’s affirmed by the Wizengamot.

Susan gets a sour look on her face, “They tried to reassign her to a useless department, but she wouldn’t have it. She made them sack her, so I’m proud of her.”

“Well send her my best wishes when you next speak with her. So, are you ladies ready for this Yule Ball?”

Nervous tittering greets my query. That’s supposed to be Neville’s cue. Oh bugger! It looks like he’s not going to budge.

“Everyone got your dresses ready and your dates vetted?”

Now I have four blushing Puffs and a stammering wreck of a Gryffindor around me – bloody teenagers! I reassess the situation. “Okay here’s the plan, I’m going to dazzle you three for the next minute or two while Neville here gets up the nerve to ask Hannah here to be his date. We can do this with or without a Confundus charm. Those willing to cooperate may just find an opening on my dance card.”

It costs me a few dances, which Aimee shouldn’t mind, and strangely enough, a demonstration of the Confundus charm since we’re not taught it until fifth year, but Neville’s got himself a date. He’s still beaming on his way to lunch.

We slide in next to Ron and Hermione. “Ron, heard you got yourself a date. Good show, mate.”

He smiles and continues stuffing his face. I look at Hermione, "So, you ready to tell us who you're taking?"

"Not when you ask like that," she shoots back faster than a curse.

Ron says something barely understandable, but whatever it is, she caught it. "You do realize that asking a girl to dance means you actually have to dance with her. You two do know how to dance, don't you?"

The panicked look on Ron's face is worth a good laugh. I could only imagine what poor little Harry Potter would have done.

Scanning around the room, I notice that the Beauxbatons table seems to be fairly active. "What's going on over there?"

"Something in that despicable Daily Prophet." Hermione waves it away. It takes me a minute to track down Lavender and get her copy.

It's pretty apparent from the front page headline why there's a bit of drama over there. The headline screams, Fleur's "Forbidden" Friendship!

While admiring the alliteration, I briefly skim the story. Someone leaked the whole story to Skeeter. Charlie doesn't seem the sort, so my guess is his partner Lyle. The troubling part of all this is reading the about the Daily Prophet offering money for pictures of her mysterious creature friend. There's a nice moving sketch of a pronghorn below the fold of the paper.

Well that's annoying! That's going to cut into my voyeurism. Fleur isn't at the table, but wherever she is, I suspect hell is being raised.

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"Shouldn't you be practicing for your staff duels tomorrow?"

"Ollie had to cancel, Neville and Ron are busy with homework. Besides, this requires more work and I'll trade some bruises for a Pensieve any day."

"Yes, it's definitely not your typical fourth year project." The Bloody Baron says inspecting my handiwork. "I don't think I made my first until my mid-twenties – very nice work."

I chuckle and continue to carve. "I gave up being typical one a long time ago. So what brings you here today William? The Slytherins are awfully quiet lately, should I be worried."

"It's Snape that concerns me."

My happy mood disappears. It's funny how mentioning that bastard's name can ruin my cheerful disposition. "What of him?"

"One of the paintings in his office is indebted to me from things I did while she was living. She informed me that Karkaroff came to his office today. They spoke in hushed tones and started to bare their forearms – before Snape decided it was too sensitive to discuss inside the walls of Hogwarts. The Head of Slytherin is going to the Drumstrang ship this evening, I thought you should know."

I look down at my incomplete work and dab the sweat on my brow. "Yeah, I'd better check it out. Any tips on dealing with the poltergeist?"

"I will track down Peeves and send him to you. He can be bribed and likes idiotic challenges. The one on the boat is a not a malicious prankster – it is a homicidal maniac."

Sighing I reply, "There's always something homicidal isn't there. Maybe we could trade? The Drumstrang folks could use more humor."

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Invisibility cloaks – they're dead useful. Thank goodness I sort of gave myself one. I walk lightly with a silencing charm on my shoes up the gangway and see a handful of students out on deck. Five minutes earlier, Severus Snape had gone up there. I lost him once he got on the deck. There's apparently some magic that obscures people from

view once they board the ship – a rather handy trick if they decide to engage in a little coastal bombardment.

For the first few weeks the ship was here, they had tighter security – individually charmed broaches that must be worn like visitor badges at all times, but as the number visitors increased, the system became unworkable and was eventually abandoned. Now, there is simply a student or two minding the quarterdeck next to a statue of a rather violent looking mermaid poised in mid-trident throw. The male and female currently there seem more preoccupied with each other than the possibility that an interloper and his pet magical artifact might be sneaking onboard.

"When exactly did I become your fucking pet, HJ?"

"Oh, sorry about that. It must have been a stray thought in my head. Pretend you didn't hear that."

It's nice to have an extra set of eyes for a lookout. Especially one that can mentally communicate with me – even if it is a ratty old piece of cloth that's about as useful as a one legged troll.

"I heard that!"

"Bother. These things just keep slipping out. Don't worry about the troll bit, I'm sure they've got nothing on you."

"Interesting to see how much fun your having breaking the rules here HJ, reminds me of the stories I used to hear about James Potter abusing his Head Boy privileges to shove his dick into Lily Evans. Is it true that the intellectuals are usually the sexual deviants?"

I shake my head trying to rid myself of the image. "I see you're out of any original material and all you have left are a few cheap shots. Are you going to need another few centuries to come up with some new stuff? I might not live that long. So, back to why we are here, where is the Headmaster's cabin?"

"I've been on this damned leaky hull once and it was six hundred years ago. I recall the memory of you going to the zoo with those

people you laughably call 'family.' Tell me, from the entrance of the zoo where exactly is the reptile house. Oh, come on you useless sack of genital warts! It's been less than a decade!"

"Point taken, do you have a general direction?"

"Aft. I think it's likely that area by the stern. The one with the flag on top of it."

The two of us make our way to the back end of the ship, dodging the students that are out on deck. I don't spy Krum or Manos. They are either inside the ship or possibly working in their laboratories. Viktor, I couldn't care less about. Manos, however comes equipped with a pair of bodyguards that will probably hex first and ask questions much later – if at all. I shiver and release my breath in a controlled manner. As handy as this cloak is, the more magic used underneath it, the greater the chances of discovery are. I'd rather be silent than warm in this case.

A sing-song shout rises from the dock immediately followed by barrage of snowballs smacking into the side of the ship. "Can the Giesty Beasty come out and play? Peeves is feeling oh-so lonely!"

"Right on time, the jester makes his appearance, is his help really worth the humiliation, HJ?"

"What humiliation? All I promised was that I was going to dance an Irish Jig with him at the Yule Ball. Besides, I'm going to use an old Marauder trick to make it a jolly old time for all. Charm a bunch of buttons with a little dancing spell, have Peeves stick them to the little area where the heel attaches to the shoe, and when he says the magic word, everybody dances a jig with us."

A low rumble passes through the vessel – equal parts creaking wood and primal growl. The hairs on the back of my neck, the few that normally stay down rise faster than Sirius in third year when JP told him that he had a one way viewing charm on the girl's showers and Carly "Double D's" McManus would be there in roughly twenty minutes. Okay, maybe I am just trying to bolster my confidence with

cheap memories of large mammary glands – surprisingly, I can live with that.

A mist forms and coalesces into a figure standing on the deck. One look at it and I'm glad I never went to Drumstrang. Most poltergeists affect a human form, like Peeves. This thing stands about nine feet tall, with long claws, and massive bat wings. Unlike ghosts, which come from a person, giests are the sum of the energy of an event or place. Peeves is the collective manifestation of all the nervous energy in this school. There's probably a really interesting story behind this thing, but there are many things in this world that I don't need to know.

On the other hand, I really need to know what Karkaroff and Snape are discussing. Peeves agreed to take this thing off my hands. With all the extra students in the castle, our in house poltergeist is feeling rather strong – good on him. I get the feeling he's going to need it.

I quit gawking as the thing leaps off the vessel and begins chasing Peeves, but am forced to double back because of the group of onlookers standing on the staircase leading to that upper deck. Sometimes well-planned distractions can also be an obstacle.

Naturally, the door is magically locked.

"What now, shit for brains? Did your master plan take into account that they might not want to be heard?"

"I'm almost insulted, Hat. I'm a Marauder. The problem with locked doors is that they don't just suddenly open. Snape might be that stupid, but I'm willing to bet Karkaroff would spot it. Rather than try something on the door, let's go around the side and look for a loose porthole. I don't need to get inside the room to hear them."

"That's not a lot of room on that walkway. Five galleons says a clumsy limp dick like yourself ends up in the water."

"You do realize that if I go into the drink, you'll end up there as well. It might be worth the money just to see if you can drown."

The second porthole on the starboard side has just what I'm looking for, a nice little air gap in it. I use a controlled engorgement charm to widen the space and make it large enough to fit my wand tip in. Next up is a handy little charm to let me hear what's going on in the room.

Snape and Karkaroff's lips are moving, but not a damn word is reaching my ears. Privacy wards are what is going on inside this room. Good thing I am a Marauder.

"Hey Hat, ever hear that expression, 'I'd like to be a fly on the wall for that conversation?' Allow me to demonstrate."

I open my pouch and use my fingers to remove the two motionless flies. Back in the day, JP used this to spy on people. Listening to Lily vent about how much she utterly despised him gave him the first clue of how she really felt.

Of course, the gross part is shoving a fly in my ear while the counterpart wings its way into position. With a few more days, I could probably devise a more elegant solution, but "advance warning," when it comes to Death Eaters, is usually limited to minutes and, in this case, I was lucky to have a few hours. That time was spent trying to make certain that Dumbledore can't track me on the Marauder's Map. Anyone looking at the Map will see that Harry James Potter is in his laboratory.

"Is that why you shit in your underwear?"

"Well, my little shrine needed essence of Harry James Potter and something a little more substantial than just blood alone. Besides, it was a quick and, pardon the pun, dirty solution to the problem. It took more time make the ring that would prevent the real me from showing up on the map. At least, knowing how the map works allows me to circumvent it."

Releasing the fly, I send it into the stateroom. If this doesn't work, I'll just focus on their lips and put Miss Chang's lip reading talents to the test. I can already tell from the two's body language that they aren't happy with each other.

"...the signs. Do you really thing Dumbledore can protect you?"

Snape scoffs back, "Which one of us bought their way out of Azkaban by trying to sell off names. I'll say this about Barty, I admire his restraint in not killing you as soon as he had a chance. How do you think the Dark Lord will view that particular bit of betrayal?"

Karkaroff shrugs, "I did not betray him. I was only ensuring my release. Lacking the money others had access to; I did what I must to survive. If he is indeed poised to return, I think he will judge us by what we have accomplished since his fall from power and more importantly, what we have to offer him now."

"I have access to Dumbledore and Potter..."

I suppress the urge to see if I could kill both of them before they get their wands out.

"Lap dog is more like it, Snape. On the other hand, I am the Headmaster of one of the most respected magical schools in Europe. You've never been there, but I assure you, it is a veritable fortress – a stepping stone to all of Europe, assuming he can conquer England. Can you say that you could offer him that much?"

Karkaroff pours another brandy and continues. "Besides, your influence here is on the wane. I've heard that Dumbledore's protection doesn't quite count for much these days and you're struggling just to maintain your position. Still, what concerns me is the return of our former master. It can be assumed that Crouch was working on his behalf, but the fact that he did not approach either of us means that we are not trusted."

Snape waves off a refill and regards the other self serving bastard with that sneer he seems so fucking proud of. "Make your point Igor."

"You're running out of patrons, Severus. The Great Albus Dumbledore's star is dimming with each passing day. The Dark Lord's mark returns and you have no plan to ensure your own survival. Whether you realize it or not, you're drowning and I am in a position to offer you a lifeline. Drumstrang could use an instructor of

your caliber and I recall from the occasions we worked together that you are quite capable with both cauldron and wand. Perhaps it is time for you to seek, as you English are want to say, greener pastures."

Snape starts to mull it over, "Perhaps I will take that brandy now."

"Do you think Snape's Animagus form is a cockroach?"

The Hat's chuckle rings loudly in my head, "It's hard to hear the words Snape and cock in the same sentence without wondering if Snape likes cock. Never recall any female visitors coming to the castle to see him."

"I'm always up for a few Snape jokes... Damnit!" My hand darts up to my right ear, but it's too late. Karkaroff spotted the fly and smashed it. The noise is deafening and the counterpart explodes in my ear. Fly guts in the ear canal, it brings back old and physically painful memories. The Gryffindor girls were particularly skillful at killing the insects when a certain Lily Evans discovered what they could do. It's time to move onto my backup plan involving Cho Chang's lip reading skills.

I ignore the crude images the Hat makes and try to concentrate on their faces. A minute later, a tangible wave of magic passes through the ship.

"What do you think that was?"

A bell starts ringing. That's probably not a good sign. Activity on deck picks up and the gangway rolls up like a giant carpet.

"I think you're screwed, HJ. Look there are three humans at the bow. They're starting a sweep for invisible people using water mist spells."

I ignore that and look at the pair I slipped by initially repositioning that mermaid statue. The female touches it with her wand and that same pulse of magic I felt earlier emanates from it. They start pointing this way and the three "sweepers" start running. A glimpse back into the porthole and I see that they've felt that second pulse as well and Karakoff is pulling out his wand.

"I think we've worn out our welcome here, Hat. I guess I owe you those five galleons."

It's only about a twenty foot drop into the water below. I cast a warming charm along the way, unconcerned about it affecting the invisibility cloak. Even so the frigid water has my body protesting. My bubblehead charm makes air a non-issue. I can stay under the water as long as necessary, but I should still get a move on it.

I pull the Hat back onto my skull and query, "You okay, Hat."

From the string of vulgarities it replies with, it's safe to assume that I can't drown it. We hurry to the shore. I'm pulling myself out when the first spells strike the water. Concussion hexes – not a very nice thing to do to people in the water. I'm guessing the Giant Squid will be here soon to investigate and I know for a fact that the Merfolk don't care for loud noises at this time of the night.

Light spells dance along the shoreline from people up and down the railings as broom riders take to the air. Several streak off towards the castle, probably to try and catch me if I was going in through the main gates. I scurry back onto the grounds and get back into the darkness which should further obscure me.

The good news is I know several secret passages and I won't have to go through those gates.

The bad news is standing twenty feet away, holding Peeves by the neck like a vision from a potion enhanced nightmare. It discards my accomplice with contempt and gestures with its hand. A small oak tree, only about fifteen foot tall is ripped out of the ground, root ball and all!

Invisibility cloaks apparently don't fool a poltergeist. See, I learned something new today. Here's hoping the lesson doesn't kill me. With it only a matter of time before someone spots this, the tree spins in mid air like a giant club.

My arm sticks out from the folds of the cloak and waves my holly and phoenix feather wand. The tree melts into liquid and the water splashes to the ground – Transfiguration to the rescue.

The Geist doesn't seem to like that and I don't have time to play around with it. There aren't many spells that will affect a poltergeist, but I just happen to know one that should do nicely. Slamming the base of the wand into the earth, I conjure lightning. "Invito Fulgrex!"

Electrical energy is disruptive to spectral presences. The bolt smashes into the ground next to the dodging creature and it recoils from the power. It's very fast and gets off the ground diminishing the strength of my spell. The Geist's aura weakens, but it responds by banishing stones and loose gravel at high velocity – like being caught out in a hailstorm. Time's wasting and I need to get out of here.

Salvation arrives in the form of Peeves, blindsiding the Drumstrang spirit and locking it in his grip. "What's wrong Geisty Beasty? I think we make a great pair – a shockingly great pair."

While the two struggle together, I pick up Peeves' not very subtle hint and cast a second bolt. It rips through the duo and both start to fade from view.

The thing utters the first intelligible words with a voice like gravel rubbed against a chalkboard, "I will find you."

I don't stop to check for an opening on my social calendar. Those two will pull themselves back together eventually, but I intend to be long gone by then. The broom riders are heading in my direction with shouts and an array of spells begin to sweep towards me from the direction of the castle.

Instead, I sprint in the direction of the Quidditch stadium. One of the four secret passages that Filch does know about is at the base of the Ravenclaw stands. It leads to the corridor just around the corner from the entrance to the Claw's tower. I look at the chains and five different locks on it with disdain and turn the chain into a snake. It falls to the ground and I hiss to it that there are some tasty mice just around the corner. Imagining the look on that miserable shit's face when he finds

the chain on the ground and tries to figure out what happened brings a smile to my lips.

The Hat and I move quickly through the other tunnel and I avoid a few more crudely crafted traps. I finally comment when I see the tin cans on a string. "Sometimes I think Dumbledore keeps Filch around because he feels sorry for him."

"Filch is just a worthless idiot, who does unspeakable things with that cat of his. Dumbledore keeps him around because children, such as you, think they've accomplished something when they pull the wool over some bitter non-magical human. Once again the value of a Hogwarts education doesn't live up to its hype."

While Hat continues to weave a story that I don't particularly want to know, I "disarm" Filch's laughable attempts at traps and then look through the peephole.

With no one in the corridor, I slip back into "The Safest Place in all Britain" and ponder the irony of that statement. At least I'm doing Dumbledore a favor by poking holes in his security.

"What are you going to do about Snape?"

The seriousness of the tone brings me back to the question at hand. "Part of me says let him go and be Drumstrang's problem. Another part wants to see him broken and impoverished for what he did to Remus."

"I thought you didn't care for the cheating werewolf."

"Code of the Marauders, an attack against one of us is an attack against all of us. Besides, there's one last part of me that knows he told Riddle the first part of the prophecy."

"And what does that part want to do with him?"

"Make certain he screams loudly before he dies. Snape's every bit as responsible for Lily and James as Wormtail and Voldemort. Peter's

only going to live long enough to prove that Sirius is innocent – then that backstabbing little fucker gets what's coming to him."

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"Oh, I hope that doesn't leave a bruise – or at least one that won't clear up before our date next weekend." Aimee gloats with a pleasant smile from the platform above me and enjoys the cheers of victory. The fourth round just ended rather abruptly. Anyone who blinked missed it.

I massage my aching jaw. Aimee was much faster than she had let on in her previous matches, or perhaps, I bring out the best in her. Yeah, I'll go with that. Still, even in defeat, I must salvage a bit of victory, "If I had known you were that eager to get me flat on my back, I would have asked you out earlier."

She shakes her head and rolls her eyes at my antics. The nearby members of the crowd howl with laughter.

After losing to Krum, Diggory, and Manos, I'd hoped that my fourth match against Aimee would go a bit better. Just as Ollie predicted, staff fighting is not my forte. It's definitely not "The Power the Dark Lord knows not."

Krum left me with a nice deep thigh bruise. Cedric and Athena simply beat me, but at least they were respectful about it. The bruises they left me with weren't intentional. Luckily, I've already got a fresh batch of healing salve waiting for me up in the dorms.

I pick myself up and walk back to my seat. Four matches, four losses, Krum is edging closer to me, but at least Fleur isn't pulling away. She's hasn't won a match either and is my last opponent. Cedric finished her before her aura started to make him stupid. It was swift and a bit more brutal than one would expect from the good-natured Hufflepuff.

"Oh tough break on that one, Harry." Ron says as I sit down on my bench. Hermione wipes the area of my face, that successfully blocked Aimee's staff, with a damp cloth while Neville takes my staff.

Normally, he would check it over, but I lost so fast that it probably doesn't need it.

Cedric and Krum mount the platform for their highly anticipated bout. Aimee's move was this very effective distortion charm, blurring the motion of the staff. When she'd used it on Diggory, he'd defeated it handily, so I hadn't thought that much of the tactic. I suppose the old saying about pride coming before the fall applies here.

"I'm not too concerned. Maybe they'll start underestimating me again."

Further conversation is interrupted by Cedric and Krum wailing on each other as the final round begins. Viktor's compact form and excellent physical condition against Diggory's long reach and speed. Up until now, Cedric hasn't even cast a spell with his staff. I don't even have an idea what he's capable of.

Krum uses that banisher that knocked me off balance, but the pride of Hufflepuff blocks that spell and responds with a jet of water. His next swing brings a cold chill with it. Impressive, a combination move with a staff! The dripping water on Krum, instantly freezes as icicles form in his hair, on his face, and most importantly, where he's standing.

The Drumstrang wizard slips seconds later and Cedric sweeps him off the platform to the wild cheers of the audience. He pumps the staff into the air with his right arm. I guess he hasn't forgotten their first wand duel and Krum's mocking. I clap and gesture my approval to the undefeated Cedric Diggory.

Minutes later, after watching Aimee defeat Athena to go a surprising three and two in the staff round, I'm back on the platform for the last match of this embarrassing day. My opponent is the also winless Fleur.

"Well," I say casually, "at least one of us will get out of here with a win."

She gives a curt nod and a glare for a reply. I mull over the possibility that she's still got her knickers in a twist over that little bit in the Great

Hall. The judge orders us to our starting position. Fleur's staff begins smoldering and catches fire. The crowd goes wild and I start wondering how fire retardant my robes are. There's a saying out there that things are always better with fire. I think I just found the exception.

Yeah, she's a bit miffed. I'd make a tacky joke about how hot this makes her, but we get the start and Fleur, along with her flaming staff is coming for me. I parry her blows, not really with practiced ease, but more a combination of desperation and luck.

I try the smoke spell, after all where there's fire there should be smoke. She gags and coughs, but keeps swinging violently. Hopping backwards, I brush the flames off my shoulder.

Spinning my staff, I launch a counterattack. Sparks fly, literally. Her technique isn't much better than mine. There's a good bet that neither of us will ever play beater. I try sweeping her legs, but she steps in close and my strike hits harmlessly off of her upper thigh. Fleur snarls and hits me square in the chest. I stagger towards the edge and teeter there.

There's a predatory glint in her eyes and she takes a final swipe at me. I block it, but the force sends me off the edge anyway. At least I've gotten used to the fall by now.

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The Baron floats next to me looking at my final preparations for today's challenge. "Dumbledore has officially refused Karkaroff's third request to use the Giest as a magical bloodhound. I would suspect it can track your invisibility cloak. I suggest you avoid wearing it in the vicinity of the vessel."

"How do you know this?"

"The Headmaster consulted the Ghost Council on whether we would allow the spirit inside the castle. I was most direct in my answer.

Should it set foot inside the castle, both Sir Nicholas and I will take care of it. Outside of the castle, you will need to be on your guard."

The Hat looks down at the two of us from its new perch. "About time Dumbledore grew a bloody pair! How long until we go out to the Quidditch stadium?"

"You sound a little eager there Hat. Any minute now, Neville and Ron will be knocking on the door."

"I want to enjoy the moment. This is something I haven't felt since Godric made me. Pity, I won't be able to help you during the competition."

I ease the two bandoliers filled with potions onto my shoulder and check the rest of my bags of tricks. "I'll manage just fine. They'll never see what hit them."

The Baron looks through the side of the bags and shakes his fist. "I am impressed, Harry. You should do well. I have my serious doubts that any will come close to matching your time."

Smiling, I answer as there is a knock at my laboratory door, "Fortunately, time is all that counts in this one, elegance be damned! I'll be interested to see what the others cooked up, but they're not me."

He slides gracefully towards the wall, "As always descendant, I shall be watching. Sir Nicholas will be close by if the Giest decides to make itself a threat."

I nod respectfully and wait until he has left to open the door. The portrait in the room knows of our connection, but it fears the Baron too much to mention this to Dumbledore. Hopefully, I can talk the old man into letting me keep this set up. It's hard to imagine what the Marauders could and would have done with a fully equipped laboratory at their disposal.

The repeated knock interrupts the pleasant trip down memory lane. I go ahead and open it. "Hello mates."

"Are you ready, Harry?"

"Yeah, I'm going to do some damage today. C'mon Hat, let's go."

Both of my classmates gawk, as I usher them into the hallway. It's amusing to watch the portraits rushing from frame to frame as we walk by them. Outside of the privacy wards surrounding my laboratory, each stride reverberates with the stone on stone contact.

"Holy Merlin, Harry! You made that?" Ron sputters. Part of me is eager to see the look on Hermione's face.

"Could you make me one?" Neville manages to get out.

"Maybe, it's kind of expensive." I look over at Cedric. My competitor must have been drawn by the noise. "Hey, Diggory. Are you ready for today?"

He looks it over and appreciates the fine craftsmanship. "A golem, Potter? You made a bloody golem?"

I look at the crossbow strapped across his back and the arrow ending in an articulated magical hand. "Yeah, isn't it great? Nice crossbow, is the arrow heavy enough to compensate for the wind?"

He doesn't take his eye off the golem and moves the fingers on his right hand which makes the fingers on the magical hand move. "I've been practicing with it for a week. Even if I don't get on the island, I just have to get the shot close to it. The shaft and the line are charmed to float and this motion makes it swim forward."

He's rather proud of his invention and rightfully so. The device appears to have an auto winding mechanism as well. It's interesting to see Diggory's train of thought. He's not even going to try to tackle the air and water elements. Instead, he's going to shoot a charmed arrow across the distance and build in some mobility to get to the fire protected dagger.

We round the corner and the area where the competitors and their advisors have gathered. Hat, in mental control of the golem slams a three fingered fist into the stone palm with a loud sound and yells, "Fear me now, bitches! After a thousand years, I'm walking on my own!"

The others have trunks and bags containing their prepared equipment and potions. Viktor is carrying a broom case, looks like a homemade broom for him. It makes sense and plays to his strength. Still, the high wind speed in a confined space makes it a dangerous choice.

My date for this evening's festivities comes over and inspects the intricate rune work, meticulously carved into the granite surface of the golem. Aimee smiles, "It's definitely a solution to the earth section and nicely done, but is it fast enough?"

I laugh, "You'll see. Trust me, you'll see."

Several others, including the advisors, look skeptical that a fourteen year old wizard could make something like this. Again, I wonder what happened to the one James made for Godric's Hollow. How long had it lasted against Voldemort? Considering James lasted barely a minute, I have to guess not very long. This one is just as tall at fifteen foot and weighs close to seven tons. It can obey my verbal commands and Hat's mental ones.

Fleur arrives last and mistakes the golem for Aimee's work. She actually managed to turn that dating issue into an opportunity for good press to counter the story in the Prophet. She raffled herself off for the evening and raised a respectable eight hundred galleons for the premier French magical hospital. I'd heard a Drumstrang wizard had won the drawing after purchasing twenty tickets at one galleon per ticket.

I pick up most of the rapid fire exchange of French, "Aimee, I had no idea you were capable of making a golem in six short weeks!"

"I'm afraid it is not mine," she gestures towards me.

"You?"

I shrug, "I am full of surprises. I keep saying this, but no one believes me."

Aimee laughs, "Full of something for certain." Fleur nods in agreement.

I feign insult. "I'm hurt. I'll have to view this memory first in my new pensieve."

The trash talking continues all the way out to the stadium. In the middle sits the specially constructed Puzzle room. There's a roar through the crowd and people pointing at my golem. Instead, I look at the Puzzle room. Just through the entranceway, I see walls of stone moving in random patterns. It's dangerous only if they entrap me. I have no intention of letting that happen.

Flames flow like a deadly artwork along the wall and ceilings daring anyone to come that way.

Where the earth walls end is a tiny "safe zone" where the water meets the shore. Swirling vortexes of water and visible waterspouts circle ominously in the area beyond. This is where most of the danger is. My tactics should minimize this threat, but there's always the chance that I have underestimated the power of the current.

At the end of the long room is a tiny spot of land floating in the heavy surf. Suspended in a column of fire is a dagger once wielded by Beowulf's apprentice, Wiglaf. It's the destination. The person that gets it back out the doorway in the least amount of time wins first place and Nicholas Flammel's pensieve.

Bagman's magically amplified voice rises above the din introducing us. "And here they are – your six champions! Have they mastered the elements? What plan do they have for being the fastest? I spy a full sized golem out there by Potter – an amazing piece of work for someone not even enrolled in Ancient Runes and I've just been handed a note that Viktor Krum will be auctioning his hand crafted – one of a kind – broom in a silent auction in two weeks. Proceeds from

the auction will go the 'Broomstick for Every Child Fund' which helps to bring the gift of flight to underprivileged children all over the world. That's the kind of giving spirit that truly defines a champion!"

The crowd roars as Krum salutes them. I look over at Fleur, who is clapping politely. She's obviously a bit annoyed that her charitable act will no doubt be overshadowed by Krum's grandstanding and the ridiculous disposable income of Quidditch fans.

"Think I should auction the golem off, Hat?"

It flexes the constructs right hand. "I have this now, HJ. The fingers are large. It may be difficult to find your tiny little testicles, but I'm sure I could crush them like grapes."

"Our contestants will be competing in ascending order in the standings. With Miss Beaucourt at six points, the French Champion will go first. Let's see what brews she has concocted, what items she has enchanted to overcome earth, air, water, and fire! Get ready, the competition is about to begin!"

"Want a kiss for good luck?" I offer loudly and draw a few looks.

She ignores my shameless flirting and withdraws only two items from her bag. The first is a gem encrusted belt. I have no idea what it is for, but suspect I will learn in a moment. The second is an elbow length dragon skin glove with a more obvious purpose to protect her hand from the fire.

At the start line, she hands her wand to Dumbledore and he signals for her to begin. Giant mirrors positioned all around the stadium allow the spectators to view the action inside the room. We are close enough to see through the walls enchanted with a Clearview charm.

"Aimee Beaucourt is off! She walks confidently into the earth area. The columns of rock immediately move to block her, but she is undeterred. She walks right through the first one! Incredible, one of her items must convey a ghost like quality to her. That's right folks tons of earth can't even touch her! Incredible! She's through the first obstacle and starts walking on the water. Can either wind or water

affect her in this state? The answer is no! She's slowly making her way across the next obstacles. Look at her go! The other champions will have to be very fast to match her time."

"That's got to be draining her." I mutter aloud. It's every bit as impressive as a golem, but that family of charms is power intensive and requires serious concentration to maintain the wraith-state.

"She's across the water and on the island. She deactivates her belt and grabs Wiglaf's dagger with her gauntleted hand in a mere ninety seconds. That's going to be tough to beat. With the prize in hand, Aimee returns to her ghost form and starts making her way back."

Aimee's time exiting the room is three minutes and eight seconds. She looks exhausted coming out of the room. Powerful magic has a way of doing just that to a person.

As they reset the room and Athena prepares to take her starting position, I move over to congratulate Aimee. She looks up from her invigorating draught. "Beat that if you can."

I chuckle and pat her on the shoulders. "You can watch the memory of your second place performance this evening in my new ... oh never mind, that joke is already a bit old."

We both turn as Athena starts her run. She uses some little charm to temporarily turn her into a bird. It gets her through the earth section quickly enough, but the winds buffet her harshly and she's forced to land and wait for the charm to undo itself. A second trinket, changes her into a fish and she tries the water. This also works well, but time continues to work against her. Over two minutes have passed before she returns to her human form. She knows her technique won't beat Aimee's wraith belt, so she's concentrating on clean execution to pickup points in the overall standing.

She finishes at four minutes and eighteen seconds and seems disappointed in herself.

Cedric races quickly through the moving earthen columns, his speed and reflexes serve him well. He stops at the shoreline and shoulders

his crossbow. His first shot is blown wide by the swirling whirlwinds and splashes into the water. The charmed mechanism at the end of the crossbow rewinds his line, but he struggles with the current that doesn't let his arrow go without a fight.

On his third attempt, he gets it close enough to the small island at the end of the room to use the enchanted hand to scurry up the embankment and leap up capturing the dagger. The ensorcelled weapon rewinds, but the two misses prove costly and he ends up with a time of four minutes and forty-three seconds.

I congratulate him anyway and Aimee asks to look at the crossbow while Krum moves to the start line. Mentally, I begin preparing for my turn.

People joke and say that Viktor Krum was born on a broomstick, but watching him weave through the columns and fly like a man possessed lend a bit of credence to that theory. Hurricane force winds jostle him and hurl him from side to side, but he simply regroups and looks for another opening and darts through it. Just like diving for a snitch, he powers right through the wall of flames and comes out holding the dagger in his protected hand.

Okay, I don't like him, but I do have to respect him. He circles around and pits himself against the wind again searching for that elusive opening. Less than fifteen seconds later he's landed on the ground and staggers unsteadily out of the doorway – a near god on a broom, but a staggering drunkard off of one.

His time, two minutes and nine seconds – the crowd goes insane. Aimee smacks her knee in frustration. "I was certain this was my event! Good luck Harry, but your golem is just going to slow you down too much."

"Watch and learn, beautiful – watch and learn." I go ahead and put my pair of gauntlets on and attach the spiked heels to my boots. I'll need them in roughly fifteen seconds. Walking to the starting line, I pass the arrogant Bulgarian.

"You will lose just like the staff duels." He says flatly.

I shake my head at him, "Just stand there and continue thinking that Viktor. You're about to learn what happens to anything that gets in my way."

Approaching Dumbledore, I levitate the Hat off of the golem and hand it and my wand to the Headmaster. "A golem is a most remarkable creation, Harry. No matter how you finish, I am impressed beyond measure."

I gesture to the bandoliers of potions around my chest. "For your own safety sir, I recommend you step back about twenty feet after you give me the starting signal." From my second bag, I remove a set of earmuffs and put them on. I pull a second smaller set and hand them to Dumbledore.

Dumbledore regards them curiously before Hat interjects, "They're for me, you decrepit old fossil."

The Headmaster ignores the Hat and looks at how I am positioning the golem. I think he knows what I'm up to. There's a distinct twinkle in his eye as he nods.

"Begin!"

I don't hear the words, but I see the lips move. I'm sure that everyone assumes that I would use the golem as a battering ram to break through the earth obstacles. I did say I'm full of surprises. I don't need a battering ram; I need a large moveable shield.

Slinging the first bandolier of ten potions between the golems legs, I scream, "Barricade!"

The golem closes its legs and hunkers down. The eight potions hit a moving wall roughly ten feet into the room and detonate like a muggle bomb – Remus Lupin's famous "boomjuice" strikes again. After the blast wave passes, I dash around the crouching golem and sprint into the damaged room yelling, "Follow."

Most of the movable walls are shattered. The ground is already reabsorbing them and beginning to create new ones, but I run through the large gap created and am at the shore before any of them are knee high.

From my bags, I pull a block of "Insta-Ice" and toss it into the churning waters. As the water solidifies, I call to my golem, "Halt at shoreline" and move onto the ice using the spikes on my boots and my dragonhide gauntlets for traction against the wind. Seconds pass as I move more like an ape than a man across my ice bridge.

I'm already at the island, one quick leap and the dagger is in my hands. Pulling my second chunk of "Insta-Ice" out, I make certain the ice bridge doesn't break up with the tidal forces fighting against it. I shove the dagger into my belt and hurry back trying to move even faster than before. Less than fifteen feet from the shore, I scream to my waiting golem, "Barricade!"

The crowd, many of whom already massaging their ears from the ruckus, has a pretty good idea what's next. I butt right up against the back of my shield-golem and whip my other bandolier of "boomjuice" over it at the regrown obstacles. The detonation is just as fierce and the golem actually moves a few feet backwards, pushing me onto my crumbling ice bridge. I start moving again and shout for it to follow, noticing the cracks in the main walls and ceiling as I sprint to the finish.

The entranceway is noticeably larger now.

Covered from head to toe in dust and trying really hard not to cough, I emerge from the dust storm to a stunned audience. The clock reads one minute and thirty-seven seconds – less than a hundred ticks. I pull off the charmed earmuffs and take in the insane volume of the cheering. Battered, and looking like it went toe to toe with a giant, my hulking golem emerges.

Dumbledore nods to me, "Congratulations on a fine time and a most unorthodox solution to the Puzzle room." His tone is guarded and I'd have to be an idiot to think that he's not suspicious.

I hand him the ancient magical dagger and retrieve my wand and advisor. Placing the Hat back on the damaged golem's head, I let it take over.

"You do intend to fix the damage, HJ."

"Fix isn't what I have in mind, Hat. I like the idea of upgrading it instead." I apply a cleaning charm to remove the dirt and dust from everywhere on my body and make my way back to the contestants.

Cedric walks up to me, "Harry! What in the hell was that?"

I make certain to look at Krum and speak loudly. "Code of the Marauders – Strike hard, strike fast, and leave chaos in your wake."

The most amusing part in all of this is the thirty minute wait while they repair the room for "Fleur's safety." She ends up playing it safe and taking three minutes and fifty seconds to finish the course. I smile and watch the overall leader board change as Potter replaces Delacour at the top spot. All that's left is the verification under truth serum and I'll collect my slightly used pensieve.

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Inside the tent, I relax and try to ignore the bitter taste of the three drops of potion on my tongue. The others wait for their turn to verify that they did the work honestly and on their own.

"The golem, the ice blocks, the earmuffs, and the potions were all enchanted by your own hands, Harry? You alone preformed all the work."

I smile, even as the Veritaserum compels me to answer affirmatively. This time it is a clean victory – no cheating at all. Life is good.

"Thank you, Harry. Congratulations on your victory. Severus, administer the antidote."

"Wait!" Karkaroff snarls. "Were you the intruder on my ship?"

"Igor!" Dumbledore is incensed. "The questioning is limited to the task!"

I try to fight it, but all I can say is, "Yes."

Snape's eyes widen in triumph. Think again fucker! "Yes, I overheard you and Snape discussing the possibility of Voldemort's return and what you could offer him when he does. Your privacy wards are bloody awful by the way."

So much for a clean victory, let the shit storm commence!

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Author's Notes - Okay, so that's a pretty long and hopefully impressive chapter. Since I have the newborn daughter, you folks might occasionally experience schedulus interruptus when it comes to updates, but I'm already outlining what I want to happen in TML9.

Visit my profile here on [fanfiction\(dot\) net](#) for all the details about my writing, both original and fanfiction.

For those interested in the current standings of the TWT - HJ 25 points, Fleur 23 points, ViKtor 20 points, Aimee 11 points, Cedric and Athena 10 points.

Disclaimer – Nothing but fanfiction

Acknowledgements – As always the hard work of Alpha Fight Club is greatly appreciated. Take a bow guys.

Chapter 16 – Dancing in the Whirlwind

My statement has the desired effect. The other five champions, their advisors, Bagman, Amos Diggory, and the "esteemed" panel of judges are all yelling at the same time.

Snape scowls, "Potter do you know where ..." Dumbledore's wand slashes through the air and the entire tent falls silent – at least for me.

Cagey bastard, he deafened me. I don't have to answer any questions that I can't hear. Nice try Snape. I'm pretty sure who he was asking about. Better luck next time, you sniveling sack of festering sphincter drippings. My eyes flit between Snape and Karkaroff, almost daring either of them to make a move.

Striding from his chair with a presence that seems to fill the judging tent, Dumbledore snatches the vial containing the Veritaserum antidote from Snape's grasp and presses it to my lips. The foul taste drizzles down my throat and a minute later the compulsion is lifted.

Dumbledore removes his silencing spell.

Karkaroff's mouth is moving, "...an outrage. The question is what are you going to do about it, Dumbledore?"

He cocks his head at the foreign wizard, "I agree that Harry's actions were most impetuous, Igor. I shall give this matter my utmost consideration. In fact, since Harry has successfully passed his questioning, I believe that I will take him to my office with his new Pensieve and we'll discuss this matter at length. I will entrust the remainder of the verification process to the rest of you. Harry, if you and your advisor would be so kind to accompany me..."

There's a hint of a threat in Dumbledore's voice. As James, I knew him well enough to know that the less Albus Dumbledore said, the

angrier he actually was. Karkaroff looks like he wants to say something, but with all the eyes in the room on him, he settles for a glare. Waving his wand, Dumbledore levitates the aged basin off the ground and motions for me to leave. Halfway out, he says, "Harry, perhaps you should apologize to Headmaster Karkaroff for trespassing on his vessel and overhearing his personal conversation. It is, after all, the considerate thing to do."

I look at him like he's insane, but see the twinkle in his eye. The old man wants me to tweak Karkaroff. "Very well, I'm sorry."

"Excellent, lad. It takes a humble man to take responsibility for his actions. I'm glad we can now put this behind us!"

The three of us began walking back to the castle with Karkaroff's growls of frustration at our backs. There are a few people still in the stands of the Quidditch stadium and a smattering of applause broke out. I nod politely, but Dumbleore's long strides don't give me the opportunity to do more than that.

Hermione races over with Ron trailing. "Harry! That was brilliant! Crude, but utterly brilliant!" She gushes for a moment before following us and picking up on the air of seriousness surrounding the Headmaster. "Is everything alright?"

Looking at my two friends, I shrug, "I'll have to tell you about it later. Right now the Headmaster and I have to have a long overdue conversation. Make sure to save me a dance tonight. Ron, I'll see you up in the tower in awhile. You've got that Transfiguration spell down for your robes, right?"

He nods and pulls Hermione to a stop. I can see the wheels in her mind turning and the concern on her face. I give her a reassuring wink.

Back in the castle, people are too intimidated by Dumbledore and perhaps the imposing and dangerous golem walking behind us. The people milling around are mostly of the male variety. The females are already up in their dorms preparing for the Yule Ball. I'm still mulling

over how much I plan to tell the old man. I'd made it three months so far on the current story, but I know he's on to me.

So what if he is? Harry Potter would blurt out the truth like a frightened child caught in a lie. James Potter would simply continue denying everything even when confronted with the truth – slippery devil that one, though, in the end not quite slippery enough. I'll let him make the first move.

The gargoyle in front of his office moves quickly aside to allow us to pass. Even the piece of masonry doesn't want to get in his way. He addresses the Hat. "The staircase will be a rather tight squeeze in with your new body. Would you like to leave it here?"

"Not particularly."

"Very well, come along." We head up the steps and into his office. I consider doing the usual awe struck kid routine at his collection of magical trinkets. Once inside, the Pensieve is floated to sit next to Dumbledore's much more elaborate model.

"It's also a Flamel," he says commenting on the skilled artificer nearing the end of her days.

"It's a beauty."

"Yes indeed, pity there will be no more. The world is lessened by that fact. Would you please withdraw the memory of the conversation you overheard? Though it is not taught on the curriculum, you seem to be quite capable of performing many things not taught here."

I keep my best game face on, ignoring his veiled question, and remove the memory. "Your's or mine?"

"Mine's larger, but if you don't intend to view it with me, I will use yours, for the sheer nostalgia. Seeing it brings back fond memories of the times I spent with Nicholas in far more innocent days."

He fills the basin with my memory and immerses himself in it. I've got a few minutes to kill, so I wander over to visit with Fawkes. The

phoenix looks young and powerful and sends a congratulatory trill my way.

"Thanks. I appreciate it. I'm guessing that things are about to get rather tense between me and your master."

Fawkes shrugs and flaps its wings and stares at the Sorting Hat on top of the golem. I wonder what the immortal creature thinks of all this. The phoenix makes a sound I can only describe as laughter and leaps off its perch landing on the golem's shoulder.

The Hat says, "You know, I can finally pay you back for all these years, you miserable, stinking, pile of maggot-ridden shit." The golem swats at the bird, but Fawkes easily dodges.

"Come back here!"

I get a few amusing minutes of watching Dumbledore's phoenix taunt the Sorting hat. Despite the new body, it is just too slow to catch the extremely nimble bird. The constant stream of frustrated vulgarities emanating from my adviser keeps me smiling right up until the moment Dumbledore clears his throat.

"A most vivid recollection, Harry, if you're not aware, it is inadmissible in a court, although with your truth serum backed testimony it might lend credence to your narrative. Still, they were only postulating their support and not actively engaging in conspiracy. Undeniably, it is a black mark on both of them, but not enough in itself to bring a legal case."

"I'm surprised you're not making excuses for Snape, or attempting to justify his behavior."

"Contrary to popular belief, Harry, I clearly do not know everything that happens within these walls. I am simply a man. A great many things escape my notice. For better or for worse I believe Professor Snape is in the process of preparing to leave the school. Despite my best efforts to encourage the two of you to get along, it appears that I've failed."

"I have no use for that pathetic excuse of a man."

Dumbledore tilts his head slightly before taking his seat and motioning for me to sit in front of his desk. "Yes, I've noticed this. I've also noticed that this bitter hatred seems to have increased since you arrived back in school this year. Since I know your paths did not cross during the summer, I am at a loss to explain why. I was hoping that you could enlighten me."

"What do you want from me headmaster?"

"A portion of the truth will suffice." His gaze bores into me and I sense a light probe of Legilimency. I parry it and notice the brief flicker of surprise followed by acceptance cross the old man's face.

"Commendable, Harry. You continue to impress me."

"I do my best."

"Yes, and now you are about to tell me something..."

"I am certain Snape will betray you. He is an unwilling servant of the light."

"Pray tell, why is that?"

"The debt he owes to my family. It forced him to change sides and act to protect the Potter family. There's that, and his unhealthy obsession with Lily Potter."

"I see that Sirius has colored your impression of the events of yesteryear."

I glance over at the Sorting hat. Arms crossed, it gives me a slow nod of encouragement. "I'm afraid that is my own conclusion. I must confess to a bit of a lie. My encounter with the Dementors did not break loose some new well of power inside me. It did, however, free the memories locked in my mind."

Dumbledore leans forward, "Memories? Whom do they belong to?"

"James Potter. All of them. His life and even his death."

"I see. You will forgive me if I ask you for some proof."

"I'll give you two memories. The first is you and James in this room discussing The Prophecy. The second memory is James Potter's final seconds trying to fight off Riddle. Will that be sufficient?"

"Indeed, you seem to have put a great deal of thought into the choice."

I shake my head, "The first shows the extent of my knowledge and since only you and James were there you can compare it to your own. It should give you enough to believe me. The second shows that I know what I'm up against. For all his training and skill, James Potter lasted barely a minute against Riddle on a battlefield of his own choosing. I have the son's power, the mother's blood protections, and the father's memories. Even so, it might not be enough."

"Should I still call you Harry?"

"That's as good a name as any. If you changed now, people would get suspicious. If you looked at the map, it shows my full name. The Marauders didn't make it that way."

The headmaster agrees, "It is a most interesting situation you find yourself in, Harry. One can only postulate what might have happened had Professor Lockhart been successful in his spell. He might have truly reaped the whirlwind. I gather that you chose to keep me unaware because of The Prophecy?"

I hadn't thought of what might have happened with that poser. As for the second part, there's no denying it. "You could have leveled with me back in the first year, or the second, or anytime up until now. From my perspective, you didn't deserve it."

"Even after the events of at the end of last year, I did not think you were ready. Tom truly desires a new body, but he remains frustrated and still lacks the means. Quite simply, I was waiting for you to mature and hoping that until that time, you would be able to enjoy what remained of your childhood. I say this with all honesty; 'Guilt' is a word that defines the last two decades of my life. I am ashamed that I could not save James and Lily, or so many of the others that fell, that I could do nothing more than leave you with her relatives, that I was duped by Quirrel, misled by the memory in the diary, and condemned Sirius to years at the hands of the Dementors. Time has indeed revealed my shortcomings in a most painful way. When I first defeated Gellert, my world was much more certain, I was a hero among heroes and they saw fit to elevate me to a role of leadership. After all, who was I to stand in the way of my own greatness? After years of battling my wayward friend, I thought I deserved that reward. Humility Harry, if there is but one truth I can teach you in this life it is to weigh your decisions with humility."

After that kind of admission, I'm at a loss for words. As usual, Hat isn't, "Ever the soft-hearted human, eh Dumbledore? It's your greatest weakness."

"It is what makes me the man I am and I prefer to see it as a virtue, Hat. I would not wish to see the world in any other way."

"It will get you killed!" The Hat practically spits. "Do you know how many of your predecessors I've watched, so certain in their power, drunk on the milk of human kindness, die all the same? That useless slit of a healer, Derwent, ignored her illness to 'finish out the year – for the sake of the children' and died behind that desk in a pool of her own bodily fluids. Helga patted me on the brim and told me not to wait up while she went to parlay peace with the giants and goblins. Two days later her head came back atop a pike. You flesh bags come and go, but rarely do you ever learn. Isn't that right Phineas?"

The painting of one of Sirius Black's loathsome ancestors scowls back at the Hat, which answers in a cackle, "This pureblood maggot spent the last year of his life diddling his Head Girl to amuse himself, filling her as much with false hope as he did his pecker. When the

bint realized that he couldn't deliver on the first and barely on the last, she lured him out into the forest, drugged him and flayed him alive."

Dumbledore clears his throat. "Thank you for that fascinating history lesson, but while there is not much life left in these old limbs, I'm not ready to die just yet. Now Harry, we must decide how to proceed. The rules of this tournament forbid me to help you in any overt way."

"I can handle the other champions..."

"Yes, I see that clearly now, but those oaths deny me the luxury of helping you directly prepare for the real task ahead until the tournament is over."

"I appreciate the offer, but I'm still coming up to speed with the memories of James Potter. If I had to estimate, I'm almost on par with him, maybe in another two months, I'll be everything that he was and looking for something more. Until I've mastered what he once knew, anything you could teach me wouldn't be effective."

He leans back in his chair and a smile crosses his face. "Of course, though there is something to be said for indirect assistance. Now that or cards have been revealed, I can seek redemption for the mistakes of my past. Let us make plans for what happens after the end of this year."

Hours later, Dumbledore releases me and I hurry down the corridor to get to the Gryffindor common room. We reached an agreement. I'm on my own for the rest of this year, but we'll have a more coordinated effort after that.

Honestly, I'm not sure what to think. I'd been prepared for angry, unrepentant "I did what I had to do and regret none of it" Dumbledore. A tired old man sitting behind the desk, his eyes full of regret for paths not chosen, troubles me. The words "I am simply a man" reverberate through my mind as I step past the portrait of The Fat Lady and into the room filled with excited and nervous teenagers.

I fight my way to the people who are solely interested in seeing the prized Pensieve and up the to the fourth year boys dorm. The quick check of my word alliance shows that Fred and George haven't been active lately. They appear to be either getting bored or up to something big. Given the fact that I was going to be out in the middle of public tonight, I'm not going to put it past them to try and humiliate me in some way shape or form.

Showering in a hurry, I take comfort in the fact that with the right switching spells, I can be dressed in less than five seconds. I still have enough time to help Neville finish preparations for his big date with Hannah. There's something of a pang of guilt knowing that Frank and Alice can't be here to offer him any parental advice.

"Make certain you tell her how pretty she looks tonight. Just stick with pretty, don't try and go into great detail, otherwise it'll sound like you been practicing it." Hannah didn't agree to go to the dance with Don Juan de Longbottom, so it's best that he strives to be as genuine as possible.

"Thanks Harry," he gulps. "Do you have any other advice?"

"Tell her how much you're enjoying yourself. Don't get caught looking down her dress. Definitely don't get caught looking at any other girls on the dance floor, but if you do notice the one of her friends doesn't seem to be having much fun, point it out to her and ask if you think it'd be a good idea for you to ask her for a dance. Girls like it when a guy is observant, but still focused on them. After every few dances, make certain to ask her if she needs something to drink, but don't pester her. Most importantly, just have fun and be yourself."

I've got plenty of other things to tell him when he gets older, but Neville needs to ease into this before he's ready for more advanced advice. It's like James' father told me – sort of, "Make your first impression in public as a gentleman and if you're lucky enough to make a first impression in private be a rogue."

Of course, this advice doesn't help me. I'm already something of a rogue.

"You look very nice this evening. Teal is a good color on you."

Aimee smiles and rolls her eyes slightly as I pin the corsage on her dress. "You're off to an early start. I'm in for a long evening, aren't I?"

Finishing, I press my lips to the back of her gloved hand. "I try. More importantly, I'll keep trying and that's the fun part." I should have gone ahead and added six months or a year with an aging potion. As it stands, I look like a smartly dressed kid, but ultimately still a kid.

The mass of guests file by us and into the Great Hall, while we wait for the rest of the champions to assemble. I spot a rather pretty looking version of my best friend in a periwinkle gown looking awfully chummy with Roger Davies and several members of the Hogwarts competition team. The Head Boy enamored with the fourth year Gryffindor? I'll definitely get a few laughs out of that. She obviously put a great deal of effort into her hair.

My date interrupts whatever half-formed plans I have for amusing myself at Hermione's expense. "So, we were told this incident on the ship is not to be mentioned. That means by the end of the night there will be roughly ten people who haven't heard. How will I get you to tell me the story behind the story?"

"I keep tabs on those who would do me harm." I pause and then chuckle before continuing, "Other than that, my lips are sealed. Your lips might unseal them, but by the time they do, you might not be interested in that story."

"You don't lack confidence do you? Please keep in mind that my heart is already spoken for."

"Yes, you said something about a boyfriend in exile. I'll try to keep that in mind, but I may forget that fact several times tonight."

She's in the middle of composing a witty reply when another champion and his date walk up, "Hello Cedric. Cho, you look very nice tonight." The two make a nice couple. The Ravenclaw in her

ivory white dress blushes while Cedric greets Aimee with a good natured hug and compliments her.

He pats me on the shoulder and lowers his voice. "My dad is going to want a word with you at some point about the thing that went on in the tent."

"I'll be happy to speak with him, or he can talk to the Headmaster if he wants."

"Is Snape going to be sacked?" Cho asks. I shoot an accusing eyebrow at Diggory, but Cho brushes it aside. "Oh he didn't say a word. I had to hear it from a Beauxbaton student."

"I'd like to think so, but I doubt it. Why?"

She looks very serious, "I'm in my OWL year. If they're going to make a change, I'd prefer they make it now and not carry on about it for the next two months and then get rid of him."

Can't argue with that logic. Apparently, Cho's like an Asian version of Hermione. The few remaining stragglers part as Fleur and the wizard who won the raffle to be her date arrive. She is quite the sight and a reminder that the aura only enhances her natural beauty – not the other way around. I nod to her pleasantly and greet the wizard, who eyes me suspiciously. His name is Gunter, Gregor, or something with a hard "G". I didn't quite catch it.

His English is halting, "They say you trespass on our ship. Many people are angry. I would advise you not to come back."

I sigh at the newest addition to Hogwarts "well kept" secrets, "I don't plan to. I found out what I needed to know."

"Headmaster is a dangerous enemy to make, even for you, Harry Potter. He deals harshly with troublemakers." There's a trace of malice in his voice.

Athena Manos walks up and breaks into the conversation. "Pay Gerhardt no mind, his cousin was one of the ones on guard duty and is being punished by our cowardly Headmaster."

At least I'm not the only one with a low impression of Igor. Still, it offends me that people are being punished because of my actions, "And what is there punishment."

She adopts a serious look, "While all of us are here, Gavrill and Brenna are spending the evening entertaining the Giest without their wands. I am certain Headmaster wanted this oaf to tell you that in an attempt to make you feel guilty at their plight. Do not be. Every student at my school has faced it at least once in our time. This is not new to them."

"Here I was prepared to ask for a transfer. I guess I'll pass." Athena must still be a bit perturbed at how Karkaroff is always favoring Krum over her. Speaking of which, I see Krum approaching and see Fleur stiffen and turn from her conversation with Aimee.

At his side is an extremely beautiful blonde. I recognize her from the pinups that grace many of the male dorms in this castle – an Eastern European Veela named Paulina. She's every bit as devastating in person and a pureblood Veela to boot. That explains the territorial anger everyone in our party is sensing from Fleur at the moment. He wanders over with her on his arm.

She looks down at Fleur haughtily and speaks in French, "Another lesser breed who has no control, what is the world coming to?"

Aimee's hand on Fleur's shoulder prevents the catfight, or maybe delays it. "She has more talent than you ever will!"

The woman scoffs at this, "I suppose, that is if talent is measured in human magic. Honestly Viktor, couldn't we have just dined in London or Paris. I was hoping for a bit more out of 'England's social event of the year', but this is so very sad. Do we have to stay?"

His French is only about as good as his English, but he manages, "Just through the dinner and a dance or two. Then we can go see the sights."

"Thank goodness for that. Is this Harry Potter? He's the local celebrity right?"

Krum eyes me with derision, "So they say..."

"I thought he'd be bigger."

"That's a nice trophy date you have there, Krum. I didn't realize that third place in the competition rated one."

She adopts a well practiced look, "Oh, he's trying to impress me. I'm sorry little one..."

I cut her off, "No thanks, I'm immune to your charm and your attitude doesn't do much for me either. Are you charging Krum by the hour or is this a set fee?"

"Immune you say..." That drew a little ire. Unlike Fleur's magical aura, which smacks everyone's face in the room, a pureblood can choose not to use her aura or wield it with precision allowing her to give a bloke a private showing, even in a full room.

It's the origin of the phrase, "I only have eyes for you." The magic tries to draw my attention to her full lips, the curve of her neck, and her ample cleavage. Under normal circumstances, I wouldn't really object. After all, I'm still a hormonal teenager, but when has my life ever been normal? I run through a quick Occlumency exercise and turn back to Aimee, "Like I said, the color of your dress suits you."

Moments later, Paulina's derisive snort is the sound of me scoring a few points with Miss Beaucourt. Viktor's date drags him to look at some of the paintings and the magical aura fades. Why is it that no one ever believes me, I'll never know.

Give Krum a bit of credit, he lives his life like he plays his sport. He wanted to embarrass me and get under Fleur's skin as well. I was right. He really is everything little Draco Malfoy wants to be.

"Well done," Aimee switches back to English. Fleur continues to stare daggers through the back of the pinup queen.

"One thing I've never understood is how Veela purebloods exist? All of them are female?"

Fleur snaps out of her anger, "They only procreate with non-magical humans. It allows their racial magic to completely infuse the unborn and always female child – guaranteeing the line continues. They hold those who marry and have families with magical humans in contempt."

"I think you got the better end of the deal. She can't use a wand and you can."

Fleur gives me a grateful nod. Perhaps, I just gained back a little ground, or at the very least made way for the others at the top of her shit list. The small talk continues for a few minutes more while McGonagall and a few other teachers usher the last remaining students inside the hall.

She gestures for us to come over and arranges us by way of the current standings. I lean over and whisper to Aimee that it's her lucky day being paired up with the leader. Finally, the doors open and we do the walk of champions to some heraldic music, the cheers of the crowd, and the occasional flash of photography. I smile and wave at the masses. It's nice to bask in their adulation, but I know all too well how quickly they can turn on a person. Still, no reason not to enjoy the ride in the applecart just because there is a chance that things could get all mushy down the road.

We take our seats and place our order. "I'm still amazed you can resist," she says.

"It's a combination of Occlumency and power."

"You keep saying you're full of surprises. How many more are you hiding?"

I smile wolfishly and butter my roll, "That would be telling, but I'll give you a free one. I'm a surprisingly good dancer."

She answers with her own smirk, "I think I'll be the judge of that."

"Eat up," I encourage, "You're going to need the energy. Interesting belt you devised."

"Thank you. Your tactics were most unusual as well."

"We were at the opposite ends, Aimee. You had an elegant solution to an intricate problem. You crafted a key and picked the lock as it were..."

"...and you settled for blowing the door off its hinges." She finishes my analogy.

"I prefer to think of it as Transfiguring much of the room into a dust cloud, but your way works just as well."

I sneak a glance over at Neville to see how he is faring with Hannah. He seems on the verge of a nervous breakdown, which is calm for him. "Oh that reminds me, I do owe some people dances at various points in this evening. Do try to contain your jealousy."

"Trust me, I'll manage."

We continue to banter throughout the rest of the meal. I've got Cedric and Cho on my right hand side, so they join in the conversation at various intervals. Eventually, the plates vanish and under the Headmaster's command, the tables and chairs march to the corners of the Great Hall and out of the way. I'd love to know how he does it. Runes on each piece of furniture would be too involved. My guess is a command on the Hall itself tied to the Headmaster. With the memory of James Potter falling at the hands of Voldemort relatively fresh in my mind, I scold myself for not using that tactic in Godric's Hollow.

But after a moment or two of thought, I concede that even with every item in the room assaulting Riddle, it probably would have only bought James another whole minute. A touch on my shoulder draws me back to the present.

Aimee regards me with a quizzical eye, “You looked like you were miles away just now. Is something wrong?”

“Probably, there always is, but for the moment it can wait. Are you ready to dance?”

“I believe that’s why we are here. Is it not?”

Banishing memories that I hope one day to avenge, I lead my date onto the floor for an evening of dancing. Ignoring the eyes of everyone else, we start to dance when the music begins, while I dredge up more pleasant memories of James Potter’s life and enjoy taking a pretty witch for a waltz around the dance floor.

Roughly forty-five minutes later, I find myself in the company of one Hermione Granger. She’s enjoying our dance and trying to wheedle my secrets out of me.

“Somehow, after everything I’ve learned about your so called relatives, I can’t picture them teaching you how to dance.”

“They didn’t. I picked it up the same way I picked up flying on a broom. It just comes naturally to me.” Amusingly enough, I’m telling her the truth – minus a few facts of course, but I’ve already told one person today my little secret and have met my quota for now.

“You really expect me to believe that?”

“Yes, I do. At least for now... So you and the Head Boy? When did that happen? I’m beginning to wonder what’s been occurring on those late night study sessions.”

Hermione rolls her eyes and tries to play it off, but she's blushing profusely, "Roger is a perfect gentleman."

"Somehow I doubt it. I'm a guy and am anything but a perfect gentleman. Still, I don't have to have faith in him. I have faith in you. If you're happy, then I'm happy for you."

Hermione is suitably stunned. "Really?"

"Of course, you think everything through. People keep telling you that you're the smartest witch in your generation for a reason. The closest thing to impulsive I've ever seen you do was when you punched Malfoy in the face and I'm reasonably certain you thought that through as well."

Her brow crinkles, "Interesting way of giving a compliment, Harry, but I'll take it."

"I could go give him the 'If he hurts you speech' if you'd like, but I suspect I'd only get to him after you gave him a thrashing. Although, I could send the Hat and its new golem body to have a word with him..."

She humorously protests, "No! That'd traumatize him. I think the less people that have to talk with that thing, the better. I'm honestly surprised that you can put up with it."

"Hat is an acquired taste."

"So is manure."

I spy the third member of the "golden trio." His date has already deserted him and he looks a tad bored and frustrated. "You seem to have caught Ron's eye as well."

"Do you think he finally figured out that I'm a girl?"

"I'm pretty sure he doesn't know what to think right about now. Make sure you go over and ask him to dance."

We have a quick laugh at his expense as the music ends and the band onstage makes way for Fudge. I hoped he'd forgotten about it, but one thing you can always count on from a politician is if there's a stage to be found, they'll be on it.

Fudge places his wand at his throat and uses a sonorous charm, "Good evening and I hope everyone is enjoying the festivities. My compliments to Headmaster Dumbledore and his staff for providing such a wonderful evening of entertainment. Tonight, I take great pleasure in rectifying an oversight on behalf of the Wizengamut. As one, we have never recognized the achievements of our youngest Triwizard champion. Harry James Potter, would you please come up here?"

I give Hermione an exasperated roll of my eyes and she pushes me towards the stage. Several people pat me on my back on the way up and the applause is suitably impressive. Fudge, naturally, is beaming like I'm some long lost relative.

As he goes into his spiel about something that happened when this body was a toddler and an incident that I recall with significantly less enthusiasm, I scan the crowd and locate my quarry – Severus Snape. My lips curl into a confident smile as we briefly lock eyes. Hey, if I have to suffer through this, he should too. I look away not giving him an excuse to try and pry.

"...so, in conclusion, it is my distinct honor to confer upon Harry James Potter The Order of Merlin, Third Class for his and his parent's defiance of He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named."

Rita's photographer snaps the pictures of me shaking Fudge's hand and him placing the medallion around my neck. He encourages me to say a few words to the crowd.

"Thank you, Minister. On behalf of my family name, I accept this. Much has been written of that day and, as the sole remaining witness, I can honestly say that it is all speculation. James and Lily Potter were truly great people. I am certain they had their flaws, as everyone does, but they rose to the challenge and risked everything to save me. I hope that wherever they are, they are proud of me."

I spy Dumbledore in the crowd and mentally thank him for the earlier advice on "humility". There's more applause and I smile for a few more pictures before heading off stage and rejoining Aimee. I make certain that we get photographed as well. Her absentee boyfriend needs a not-so subtle prod.

Funny, if they'd have given James a medal, he'd have worn it proudly and proceeded to use it to bed every witch possible. Lily would have worn it as validation that a Muggleborn could succeed in a world that is slanted against them. Little Harry, he'd be overwhelmed by the circumstances and would be doing his best to fade in the background.

Me, I'll just accept it and move on. From the corner of my eye, I spot Hermione leading a protesting Ron onto the dance floor, "Ready for another dance, Miss Beaucourt?"

"Not yet, I need to powder my nose, but I think Fleur could use a dance."

Fleur looks irritated by the close proximity of her date. Her aura seems to be getting the best of him and he looks a tad infatuated with her.

"How about it?"

"No. She stays with me!"

She rounds on him and whatever he sees in her eyes, it isn't pleasant. Very slowly she says, "I go where I please."

The wizard shrinks back in fright. Fleur practically drags me onto the dance floor. "Careful," I say, "you'll start leaving bruises on me if you don't relax."

The French witch calms slightly, "He is another weak-minded fool."

"Well it's nice to know that you are having fun."

"You are having a laugh at my expense, no?"

"No, not really. Remember, we both have our problems. There are a lot of people out there who want you because of your heritage. There are a few out there who want me dead because of mine. Neither of us loves the spotlight. Take it from a guy who was just getting an award for being lucky enough to survive. Unfortunately, you made yourself a 'prize' for the evening and though you did it for a good cause, I'm guessing you're regretting it right about now."

The up tempo music finishes and a slower ballad begins. Fleur hesitates, but I go ahead and encircle her in my arms and start slow dancing. Maybe one day I'll tell her that she did actually dance with Monsieur Pronghorn – perhaps a day when there is no wand nearby and everything I'm wearing has been fireproofed.

Fleur compares rather favorably to all the females that I've slow danced with tonight. Even irritated and upset, there is a natural grace to her movements. People can learn the steps and the motions, but grace is something that can't be taught.

"I hate the crowds," she mumbles softly.

"Me too. Is that why you enjoy broom racing so much?"

"Yes, the crowds are still there, but always distant enough. When I fly, I race ahead of everyone else's expectations for me. I am not the diplomat's daughter. I am not the 'Belle of Beauxbatons'. I am not some delicate, beautiful flower. I am a person who flies very fast and few can keep up with me."

She pauses, probably wondering if she is saying too much. I give her something in return, "My life is in the middle of a whirlwind. I escape it every so often, but it always manages to track me down and drag me back into the maelstrom. Sometimes, I can see it coming for miles, other times it sneaks up on me and catches me off guard."

"It seems you embrace the danger. Why else would you sneak onto the ship and risk the wrath of their Poltergeist?"

"Ever since my name popped out of the goblet, that whirlwind has been coming for me. The wizard, the one they just gave me an award for beating, the one they can't bring themselves to name – he isn't completely dead and gone as they'd like to think. He's trapped somewhere in between, searching for a way back and I know that if he does figure out a way, he'll try to kill me again. It's forced me to grow up and figure out how to deal with it."

We continue to dance with her lips near my ears. "And what have you figured out?"

"That I've been far too lucky for my enemies to keep underestimating me. I can't count on that anymore. The world already thinks I am the next coming of Merlin and I say, 'So be it!' Maybe if I'm fast enough and powerful enough, the whirlwind will start running from me."

"Just like that? You make it sound very easy." Her breath is warm on my neck and I'm starting to get a tad uncomfortable with how this dance is playing out.

"It's not, but I also don't have much of a choice." I release her and step back as the music changes yet again. "It looks like our dance is over now, thank you."

Fleur smiles and composes herself. "Hopefully, we can both overcome our problems. I think I'll go get some fresh air."

I watch her walk away as Megan Jones bounces over to me wanting to collect on her dance. Something just passed between the two of us. Harry wouldn't have known what it was. It was what people call a moment or a connection. String enough of those together and it becomes a relationship. A younger version of James would chase her down and try to capitalize on it. I don't. The older version, he made that kind of deep connection with Lily, but only after years of childish behavior. She betrayed him in a moment of weakness and I might not be ready for something like that right now. It may have happened a long time ago, but for me, the memories are all too fresh.

Dumbledore isn't the only one troubled by events of the past.

Author's notes – Well, it's been a long time coming. Thanks for reading. Visit my profile for news on my original stories. Comments and story discussion can be found on Darklordpotter and the Fanfictionauthor's forum.

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Chapter 17 – The Dykstra Shuffle

"Care to explain what that was all about?" Aimee Beaucourt says. "I don't even know how to dance a jig."

"Must have been something Peeves did. What makes you think I had anything to do with it?"

"Because the Poltergeist kept looking at you and you used it against Durmstrang's spirit."

I shrug it off and keep dancing with her. "It does seem like a strange occurrence - that everyone would suddenly decide to break into a jig like that. Still, I don't know why you're looking at me. I'm hardly known for my pranking skills. If anything, I've been on the receiving end quite a bit this year."

My date remains unconvinced. "I'm still trying to figure out how you did it. Humor me, Harry. Did you charm the dance floor?"

"Magic is a strange and mysterious thing, Aimee. Sometimes, we shouldn't look for answers when none are forthcoming." The memory of Snape dancing with a disgusted look on his face is going with Hedwig in the morning. Sirius will get a kick out of it.

"Right before your little prank ..."

"Again with the accusations. It hurts - right here." I tap my chest for emphasis.

She gives me the "oh please" eyes and continues. "I was on my way over to question you about your dance with my best friend."

"Can we go back to talking about the prank? I might have a theory about how it occurred." I offer a chipper smile.

"You're not getting away that easily. Normally, it's the boys walking away from her to clear their heads, not the other way around."

"As I recall, you're my date, and correct me if I'm wrong, but I've been flirting with you all evening."

"Harry, I am enjoying being the center of your attention, even if I sense that I'm not the one you want to be with."

"Maybe you're so used to that happening that you're trying to push me at her?"

"You're correct that I am pushing you in her direction. Of the three of us, I am the one who is already spoken for. Stephan may not be Harry Potter, but I am happy with him."

"Are you trying to convince me or yourself?" James was a master of being elusive and counterattacking.

"I don't believe we are talking about me right now, despite your persistence, Harry. She mostly dates older men, but only for short times. They cater to her every need and after a while, it annoys her. You frustrate her and I find myself somewhat rooting for you."

I look into Aimee's eyes and lie my arse off. "Again, I think you're reading way too much into this. You know how Fleur hates the crowds. It's humbling that you would think that I could get under her skin like that."

"Whatever you're doing, it's working—keep it up."

The song finishes and the next one has an upbeat tempo. We begin dancing to the new rhythm. "I'm afraid I don't know what you're talking about."

"She can't figure it out and it is getting to her. She's used to the older ones chasing her, the ones smitten with her. You're confusing her."

"And you disapprove?"

"No."

"No?" Some best friend!

Aimee laughs. "She could use a bit more confusion in her life. It will make her easier to beat when racing season starts again."

My turn to laugh. "Looking for an edge?"

"You've seen her fly. If I could charm her robes and turn them to lead, I'd do it in a heartbeat. But more importantly, I'd like to see her happier on the ground. It's one thing to fly angry and to want to beat your opponents every time, but life is not a giant broom race."

"So you're brushing me off? What makes you think I'm more interested in Fleur than you?"

"She's Fleur Delacour and you're Harry Potter - legends in the making."

"I think you're selling yourself woefully short."

She blushes slightly and replies, "For someone who—according to the local gossips—hasn't really had a steady girlfriend or even that many dates, you have a remarkably gifted tongue, but I think I have realistic expectations for my love life and they don't include you."

Her comment left her wide open for some serious innuendo about exactly how gifted my tongue is, but I bite it back. I've given the witch a hard enough time as it is. As much as I enjoy the friendly banter, it's time to take it down a notch. "So that is your final answer, milady?"

"Yes. I would rather watch the fits you inspire in my best friend than be the one alternating between giddiness and an angry rage. It will be far more entertaining that way."

We break for some refreshments and descend into meaningless teen-aged chatter while I consider Aimee's words. She's given me her "blessing" to chase after her best friend. I'm a little torn on the subject. Fleur seems like a girl that needs considerable effort to properly court and even more to retain. Am I really looking for something that serious at this stage? She might look at me as only a fourteen year old, but from my perspective, she's just a seventeen year old. The reality is that Fleur might not be mature enough for me.

Then again, she has the hottest body I've ever seen, and without some risk there can be no reward.

"Can I bother the two of you for a moment?" I interrupt Cedric and Cho.

"I dunno, Cho. He looks like a shifty one. I'm not sure I trust him with you."

The Asian witch replies, "He has been dancing with a different witch every few minutes."

"Oh, I'm not here to dance. I actually need Cho's help. There's a bit of a conversation that I'm missing, but I happen to have a Pensieve and I recall that you can read lips."

Cedric's pretty quick on the uptake. He's also got a protective streak. "Harry, I'm not certain you should be getting Cho involved in that."

Cho seems to appreciate his concern. "I'm sure that I'll be fine. To be as accurate as possible, I need to hear as much as I can." She pauses for a moment before continuing, "There's nothing I shouldn't hear, is there?"

I lower my voice and make certain only they can hear me. "Depends if you can stomach the truth or not. The medal they gave me for living through my own murder—well, let's just say he's almost dead, but not quite."

"I want to see it too," Cedric adds firmly.

I agree and we pick a time. The more people who believe me, the easier it will be for Dumbledore to convince the world to remove its head from its collective arse when the time comes to go public. Cedric and Cho are well-respected in their houses and their popularity isn't subject to wild swings like mine. She's obviously competent and Cedric has proven to be capable. It's a good combination. It's never too early to recruit a few allies.

Starting to leave, I remember another important matter. "Hey Cedric..."

"Yes?"

I lean close and whisper, "While we're on the topic of conversations we shouldn't be having and poorly kept secrets, I heard a rumor that there are six dragons being held in the forest. There just happen to be six of us. You know what that means?"

His eyes bulge and then he sighs. "Yeah, I reckon I do. Thanks for the heads-up."

"I'd have mentioned it earlier, but I didn't want to ruin your dinner and most of your evening. Since the evening is almost over, cheers, mate!"

"What have you got in mind for the dragons?" Padfoot holds up a shot glass of Firewhiskey in the mirror, swirls it and swallows it in one gulp.

"I'm still researching my options. It really depends on what they want us to do with the dragon. We'll see. So, how is France treating you?"

"Well, Lady Flamel is starting to go downhill."

"Sorry to hear that."

"She tells the most fascinating stories and I suppose it's somewhat put a damper on my romantic conquests. How's the dating scene at Hogwarts? You and the Beaucourt girl made the society page here."

"Aimee's stuck on some enchanter in the Azores. She's trying to direct me towards Fleur."

"How firm is Aimee's resolve?"

"She puts up a good act, but it's shaky, at best. It's really a question of whether I want to or not."

"And the Delacour witch?"

"Gorgeous, no boyfriend, talented, and somewhat nice - once you get past the frosty exterior."

"So why are we having this conversation? Your choice is blonde or brunette. I can see why you wouldn't want a redhead."

I shrug. "I'm still fighting the fourteen year old body part. Plus they're teenage girls. Sometimes, I don't know what I'm doing here."

"All appearances indicate you're just a teen-aged boy. Skirt chasing is in your blood. Hell, it's still in mine. I just happen to be better at it."

"Some role model you are!" I laugh. It's refreshing to hear him glib and recovering. The time in Azkaban was hard on him and over a year on the run was no picnic either. He looks and sounds better.

"You bet your Firebolt I am! This holiday season, I'm shopping for mercenaries. They're what everyone wants under the tree this year."

"How's it going on that front?"

"Mostly just collecting names and rough estimates. It's a little early to be putting people on retainer, considering we don't know when this war is going to start. What about your end—making any new friends?"

"Cedric Diggory and Cho Chang viewed the memory of Snivellus and Igor plotting. She's a lip reader—"

"There's a joke there somewhere."

"Shut it. Anyway, she helped me fill in the blanks after Karkaroff squashed my bug. The missing dialogue didn't add anything anymore incriminating to the mix, but just them seeing it should help us in the long run. Cedric's father took over Barty Crouch's spot in International Magical Cooperation and the Chos..."

"I remember all about Cho Ri. She, of the double joints and acrobatic build. You, uh, James, weren't the only one to see her personal circus act. They're well connected people, and Ri was especially well connected. I wonder if she's single, again. France is nice, in both the cuisine and company, but I could use some variety."

"Don't ever change, Padfoot. Hey, if you were going to prank a pair of Arthur and Molly's boys, what would you recommend?"

"What are we looking at here? After all, pranking is serious business."

I groan. "I'm ashamed to admit that they got me with a partial clothes transparency the other day. They've been relentless as of late, since I pulled off the best prank of the year with that Irish jig at the Yule Ball. The short of it is that I went to breakfast with my boxers showing through my robes. So, I'm looking for something between stop annoying me and abject humiliation."

"Well, what do you think about this..."

"Potter!" Two angry voices sound off in unison. Several people are still in the common room, either doing some last minute revisions to their assignments, getting ready for breakfast, or a few might have been tipped off to hang around the common room.

"Is there a problem, boys?"

"Undo it. Now!"

"I'm afraid I don't know what you're talking about." I reply from the couch twirling my wand on the tip of my fingers.

The Hat steps out from the corner where it had been resting, "Something go wrong in the bathroom this morning? You were up there for awhile is it because you were trying and failing to undo it, or that you liked it too much?"

I laugh at their scowls, "The question that you need to be asking yourselves is: was it a potion, a charm, or did I really switch your willies? Who grabbed who this morning? Either of you have the dreaded morning wood?"

There are the requisite number of gasps, groans, and guffaws. Hermione is torn between her need to have a go at me and laughing uncontrollably.

"You bribed the House Elves to give us something, just like the buttons attached to everyone's shoes!"

"If you want to think that you can. I also could have done it with the cloak. Hell, I could have just slapped a Silencing Charm on my shoes and walked pass the two of you snoring. The two of you keep testing my little warding schemes on a weekly basis. Hopefully, you're at least learning something from all this. One of you managed to get past the age line the other day. Congratulations are in order. It only took a few months."

"Potter, I thought I told you, not in the Tower."

"Yes, you did put your foot down Holly, but ask them – their charm was applied before I left the other day. I'm just getting bored of this annoying game, so I'm putting my foot down." Turning back to the twins, I say, "Would you like to wake up every morning like this? It's a sensory transference charm. Let's a healer feel the actual pain from a patient. Doesn't respond to a simple dispel magic, but it'll wear off in an hour. Just try to avoid grabbing your willies for the next hour or so

and forget about what your brother's pecker felt like in your hands. I'm glad we had this talk."

The Hat's heavy footsteps shake the earth with long powerful strides as we head towards the Quidditch stadium. Poor Neville still jumps at nearly every step the construct takes. I've got dragons on the brain and ignore it. Depending on what they want us to do, there are several tactics I can try. I pass Fred and George taking bets on who finishes where in this challenge.

"How's the action, boys?"

"Bugger off, Potter."

So much for being nice, I look over at Hat and ask, "Do you want this one?"

It smiles, "It's almost beneath me, HJ - almost. You two gingers really need to develop a sense of humor. I doubt that floppy-lipped screamer with the foreskin fetish will cover this round of debts!"

I sit back and watch the master at work. It starts below the belt and keeps right on going. They hate being poor every bit as much as Ron does, and their best efforts to get out of poverty have left them deep in debt to Alicia. Rumor is that Alicia dipped into her vault to pay off all the people Fred and George owed money to after the first few events.

"To think, you two worn-out dildos think you're this generation's version of the Marauders! Potter's father ran this school and both of you put together wouldn't be fit to wash his semen-encrusted underwear. It's just sad how things have gone downhill."

I study the board and ignore the Hat's jab at me. Krum is three-to-one to finish in first. Fleur and I are longer shots at five-to-one. The odds get progressively longer for the other contestants.

"Your money isn't welcome here, Potter. Take your toy and move along. You're scaring away business."

"Please! Anyone who wanted serious action has already owed the Goblins. Are you finished, HJ? These minor leaguers are boring me. Maybe they'll sell lemonade at the next event—five Knuts for a glass!"

We walk off leaving those two looking as stupid as ever. I look up at the Hat, who has a "rather pleased" look on its face, "You were a little harsh on Alicia there - any particular reason?"

"I've always wanted to call someone else floppy, but never really had the opportunity. It's a difficult word to work into a conversation and by itself, it just didn't seem like it was enough."

After a minute of laughing our way toward the stadium, Neville asks in a quite voice, "What's a dildo?"

The Hat pauses for a moment and says, "You handle this one, HJ."

Everyone makes a half-hearted attempt to feign surprise at the dragons. The amount of burn salve Poppy had me make over the last week would have been a clear tip off if I didn't already know. Fleur obviously told Aimee, and I seriously doubt Karkaroff's ability to keep secrets. Hell, he rolled over on his Death Eater buddies, so odds are Krum and Manos know as well. The ladies all draw first. Fleur draws a Welsh Green, Athena faces the Hungarian Horntail, and Aimee gets to square off against the Ukrainian Ironbelly.

I draw first amongst the males, and pull out a replica of a Chinese Fireball. Krum gets to outwit a Norwegian Ridgeback, and Cedric draws a Swedish Short Snout. The dragon handlers went all out. Nearly every species of dragon is represented.

Bagman announces that all six are nesting mothers and that there is a fake egg in amongst several other eggs. The object of this challenge is one of guile - to remove the false egg. The bonus is that

the dragons are chained, so at least we don't have to worry about fleeing from a large, cranky dragon in a confined space.

I've brushed up on my dragons; the Fireball has the greatest range with its breath and is quick with its tail. Of the breeds, it's the most serpentine, whereas the others are more lizard-like. It's a slow flier, but fast on land.

We're not going to be fighting in the air and I have no intention of getting close enough to its flames.

"You will each have ten minutes to remove the golden egg, which contains a clue to the next challenge. Should you not recover your egg in the allotted time, you will only have three days to discern the riddle of the egg, whereas your opponents will have almost a month. Good luck to you all. For this challenge we are proceeding in descending order. Naturally, that means Mr. Potter will be going first. We will send for you when the Fireball is in position in the arena."

Going first is a surprise. I'd expected to go last. A glance at Dumbledore confirms his hand in it. Of course, everyone else was expecting I'd go last, too. Now, if someone planned to make mischief or have a go at me during this challenge, they'd be hard-pressed to alter their plans on such short notice. He's a crafty one, that Albus Dumbledore—well-played, sir.

Quickly, I run through all the contingencies I've prepared and slowly allow a devious smile to grow across my face as I compose my solution. I know just how I'm going to handle this.

After all, a dragon's eyes aren't the only vulnerable point on its head.

Fleur paces nervously knowing she's up next. The others are trying and failing miserably to get comfortable as they settle in for the wait. "Nervous?" I ask

"Of course," she snaps back. "Anyone with half a brain would be."

"I'm not."

Fleur glares at me and a slight smile crosses her face, "As I said - anyone with half a brain would be."

Wonders never cease! She's giving me a little cheek. This demands immediate retaliation! "You know something? We haven't had a side wager since the dueling tournament. How about it?"

"What are the terms?" Her competitive streak comes to the forefront.

"Highest score in this challenge wins. Loser—which will be you—buys lunch in Hogsmeade."

There's a predatory laugh preceding her reply. "Oh really, I have expensive tastes. Are you certain you can afford me?"

"Money is no object, especially when it's your money."

"What makes you certain that one of you will win? Dragons are nothing to me." Krum interrupts our witty and charming banter with his Neanderthal posturing.

Fleur looks over at him, "Very well, I can eat lunch off of Potter's coin and dinner from yours. It matters very little to me as long as I am not paying."

"You're right; having Krum buy me dinner would be a fitting way to end the day."

Krum gives an evil leer. "I do not like the food in Hogsmeade." He points at me. "When I win, you will serve me dinner on board the ship—" His finger rotates to the French witch. "—and you will bring my breakfast to my private cabin."

"Always with the humiliation, eh, Krum? I'm beginning to wonder about the skeletons in your closet. Still, I don't know if Igor would be all that keen at hosting me on your rowboat, again."

"As my guest, no harm will come to you, unless this frightens you."

"Fair enough, Viktor. Why don't you peel Igor's lips from your arse and tell him it's a deal?"

My quip earns a derisive snort of laughter from Athena, who immediately joins in the wager. Cedric holds his hands up and shakes his head while saying, "No thanks; I'll pass. I'm concentrating on getting by the dragon, not trying to outdo the lot of you."

Fleur tries to draw her best friend into it. "How about you, Aimee? So far, I have lunch, dinner, and tomorrow's breakfast taken care of. At this rate I'll be too full to take part in classes on Monday morning."

"I'm with Diggory. I don't want to take my eyes off the prize. The rest of you can play your silly games, but victory will be mine!"

Honestly, I was just trying to make nice with Delacour. Somehow, this all evolved in the span of two minutes. "Okay. The four of us are in and we've got two nervous nellies."

"What about external influences?" Athena asks—a subtle reminder that these challenges haven't exactly been on the up-and-up thus far.

I reply, "If something happens, the champion wasn't involved and through no fault of their own - they lost, or won, they're out of the wager. Otherwise, it's not like we're swearing oaths or offering up first born children here."

We hash out the rest of the details in an orderly fashion. I suspect that they drag things out a little, thinking that they're disrupting my last minute preparations.

Finally, Percy Weasley sticks his head into the tent. "Harry, they're ready for you."

It's show time!

I step into the cage and look at the Chinese Fireball across the way. Transfiguring a goat out of a rock, I send it charging towards the creature and watch it breath fiery death on it to get a sense of the beast's range.

Adding about twenty feet for safety, I transfigure myself a desk and chair. Quickly, I survey the crowd and spot the section where the press is congregating and Accio some quills. A shaping spell makes a quick stone bowl, and my wand starts spewing ink out of its tip.

Bagman, on announcing duty, is going spare. "I'm not certain what Potter's up to, but this is certainly no time for sending correspondence."

Time ticks away as I finally spot Penny. "Accio Penny's notebook!" Her exasperated expression and Ollie's laughter are reward enough for me. I could have conjured some, but that wouldn't be nearly as fun. Rita sees me looking at her and clutches her notebook protectively.

With that I begin writing as fast as I can. This part will take the longest and I need to make certain I get all the words right.

I finish the first one and start separating all the rest of the sheets out into a stack. Deciding I don't have enough, I conjure some more parchment and set the eight quills I managed to summon each in front of a stack.

As the crowd murmurs and the time hits the four minute mark, I cast a succession of copying charms - seven in a row and the quills leap into action. With the remaining parchment, my next charm folds them into envelopes as the eighth quill begins addressing them.

To the Chinese Fireball

Quidditch Stadium

Hogwarts

Too bad Vernon isn't here to see this; he'd likely try and get me a job stuffing fliers or some such rubbish. If there were any representatives

of magical publishing houses in the audience, I'd likely be leaving quite an impression, though most of them have a printing press for such work these days. But a small group—of, say, four friends?—might have used such an assembly line to produce an occasional leaflet, newsletter, or a horribly funny cartoon pamphlet concerning a character named "Epans" and his relationships with farm animals.

I decide it isn't time to revisit old memories, no matter how pleasant. I start charming Howlers as fast as possible.

Dragons have sensitive hearing. It's not only the eyesight that is extraordinarily keen and I'm about to send it a hundred howlers. Overkill? Yes, very much so, but even with a mass Fireproofing Charm, they won't last long against that Fireball. It would be even better if Padfoot were here to listen to the HJ Potter performance of Paint It Black from the assembled mass of letters.

Ever do a hundred Howlers in the span of a few hundred seconds? I don't recommend it. There are boos raining down from the stands, but I don't let it disrupt my rhythm.

"Potter's at the eight minute mark and has made no effort thus far. Ladies and Gentlemen, I am at a loss for an explanation."

"That's because you're an idiot," I mutter, summoning a rock and transforming it into a little helmet—just the right size for a dragon egg. My target is protected against Summoning Charms. That's why I'm using an old twelfth-century Fetcher Charm we nicknamed "Little Wing"—good old Hendrix. The Marauders often used the Fetcher to pick up glasses of juice, pastries, whole pies, and raw eggs—especially raw eggs—and bring them to a designated point, such as over Epans'—oops, Snape's—head, and release.

Perhaps that's why he stopped caring about his hair? I'd never thought about that before. I coat the inside of the winged helmet with a Sticking Charm. All systems are go!

For a last minute distraction I transfigure a rock into a cow and send it walking to its doom while I disperse the Howlers on all sides of the

beast. The Fireball stays true to nature and ignores all the paper in favor of the mobile beef snack.

I'm forgetting something... Oh right, my hearing protection. I conjure a set of earmuffs and cast a Silencing Charm on them. I can't hear Bagman anymore, but I think the crowd has finally caught on to what is about to happen and is scrambling frantically to cast their own Noise-Canceling Charms.

They should have known better after the Puzzle room - I don't mind making a lot of noise. Almost as one, the letters turn red and leap into the air as the Fireball is chomping down on the fake cow in a display of gore.

While my letters scream at it, the poor beast goes completely spare, spraying flame everywhere. Between the Howler's magical ability to dodge and my temporary Fireproofing Charm, over half make it through the first verse. I release the flying helmet and direct it towards the nest at ground level, while the Dragon's attention is focused on the swirling letters "looking hard enough into the setting sun."

Nine minutes and forty-five seconds after walking out here, the Fetcher and fake egg lands in my open palm as the volume continues to diminish. That's cutting it close, but it doesn't matter as long as I finished in under ten minutes. Turning, I head towards the designated exit knowing that I just pranked a Dragon and to some extent a Quidditch stadium filled to capacity. It's quite possibly the new benchmark for Marauderdom.

That's gotta be worth a decent score. How often does someone beat a dragon with common household magic and an animal transfiguration or two?

Poppy's waiting at the medical tent to give the exiting champions the once over. Despite never approaching the dragon I comply. The medical tent does have one of the best views in the stadium of the arena.

I set the egg down while she laughs at me and runs a cursory scan. "Harry! That was the single funniest thing I have ever witnessed. You should be proud of yourself."

"I agree, Harry. Your parents, especially James, would be beaming with pride." A man's voice says.

The new voice triggers a memory in me, one that isn't terribly pleasant. "Hello, Moony."

At the entrance to the medical tent, we watch the handlers move the Welsh Green into position. I spot Charlie Weasley in amongst them and mutter to myself. My ire is looking for other targets than the man next to me, and with the exception of Ron and Arthur every male in the brood fits the bill.

"What was that, Harry?" Remus says.

"I'm making a mental note to tell Arthur and Molly's three oldest off at some point. I should've said something to Percy earlier, but my mind was a bit preoccupied."

"Pray tell why?"

"At the beginning of the school year, they knew all about the tournament and acted like it was some kind of big effing joke. Of course, they're not the ones that were snookered into the damn thing, and none of them have almost been killed on several occasions by it. It's no different from last year. I had to sneak into Hogsmeade under the invisibility cloak to find out that Sirius was my Godfather. Same shit, different year, I guess. Someone's always keeping something from me."

He pats me on the shoulder in what's meant to be a fatherly gesture. It only succeeds in irritating me. "I won't pretend to understand what you are going through, but I do sympathize."

"Thanks. So what brings you out here today?"

"Professor Dumbledore wanted additional security on hand. He called up some old friends."

"The Order?" I look around and spot Diggle and Podmore sitting near each other. Dumbledore's putting things into motion already. My faith in him is somewhat restored.

"How do you know about that?"

I lie. It comes easily to me. "Padfoot and I use the charmed mirrors."

"Understandable. I'm going to see him in the next few days. With the numerous Pensieves at his disposal, I plan on showing him this. It will bring a smile to his face."

It gets a laugh out of me, "I'm sure he'll enjoy it to no end. Though he'll be in a fit about my scores just the same as I am." Remus joined me when they put up the woefully inadequate scores. Maxim and Diggory gave me a pair of sixes. Bagman a seven. Karkaroff a three. The one bright spot was Dumbledore's nine, though I'll be hanged if I know what he deducted a point for.

Shit! I'm actually rooting for Fleur now. They're just about ready to call her out.

"And now our next contestant is Fleur Delacour from Beauxbatons! Let's see what strategy she has come up with to get her golden egg!"

I watch her enter the stadium. She wastes no time and moves to about thirty feet from the green. Fleur starts chanting and moving her wand in slow deliberate circles. Remus identifies it first, "Sleeping Charm. She's going for Tasha's Lullaby, if I'm not mistaken."

"Not bad. I liked mine better."

"I agree. Your method was far more entertaining. She's liable to put a portion of the crowd to sleep as well."

"... and the rest will fall out from sheer boredom. Watch! I bet they give her a higher score than me," I finish.

"You played to the crowd and not the judges. It was a mistake your father often made as well."

"What did you say?" I spit out with a bit of venom. That comment and the abundance of adrenaline in my system gets my hackles up.

Remus looks at me curiously, "I was merely stating that your father's methods were often based on getting the most laughs from the most people, and most importantly, what amused him the most. James didn't necessarily dazzle someone with complex spellcasting - though I assure you he was most capable. Your solution to the Puzzle challenge was similar to his style: loud, destructive, and completely over the top."

This mollifies me to some extent and I do my best to shut up before I explode on him. Like one of the stupid history lectures, I repeat over and over in my head—It doesn't matter that he slept with Lily. I'm not James. No one ever made Lily do something she didn't want to do.

"Tell me, Harry, have I done something to offend you? If so, I'd like to take this opportunity to apologize, but I wouldn't mind knowing what I'm apologizing for."

Remus always was the most "sensitive" among us. "I don't want to have this conversation right now, Moony."

He pauses. "Then I have slighted you in some manner. It will make you feel better if you tell me."

"Doubtful. Drop it."

"If it was the lack of correspondence over the summer, I do apolo..."

"It wasn't. Let it be, Lupin." My voice takes on a cautionary tone and I feel the anger bubbling up inside of me.

"Harry? I think I deserve an answer."

I draw my wand and drop Snape's famous Muffilato on us. "I don't give a flying shit what you think you deserve. We're not doing this now. End of story."

Lupin processes this. I'm sure my anger is coming out of nowhere, at least for him. "Harry, part of growing up is being able to ..."

"To what? Look a man who slept with Lily Potter in the eyes and act like nothing's wrong?" That was probably the worst possible thing to say, but the hell with it!

"How did you ..."

I cut him off again. "At least you're not trying to deny it. Get out of here, Lupin! Now!"

He flees like the armies of hell are chasing him. I mentally kick myself for going that route with him. I just hexed him in the stones for something he did back in 1981. That day probably haunts him and I know all too well about his self-loathing issues. At heart, Remus Lupin is a good man. Dumbledore is a perfect example that a good man isn't necessarily perfect.

I should be able to get past it, but I can't.

Even with all my memories, I'm still in a hormonal teenaged body. I toy with the idea of going after him, but instead I remain rooted to the spot, watching Fleur complete her Sleep Charm at the seven minute mark. She glides forward to collect her prize.

The dragon lets out a loud snore and a jet of fire flares from its nostril. The heat singes her robe on her right arm and probably left a burn. She yelps and her graceful exit is turned into a sprint out of the waking dragon's range before it fully regains conscious.

Near the tent, she stops and puts out the fire on her sleeve. I've seen that look of anger and frustration on her face several times in this tournament. It means she's unhappy with her performance.

"Nice job," I say. "That bit at the end will cost you a few, but I'm guessing you'll be in the lead. Follow me and we'll get some salve on that arm while Madame Pomfrey gets you checked out."

She mutters while she hops up on the examination table and turns herself over to Poppy's tender mercies. The healer looks at me and asks, "Where'd Mr. Lupin go?"

"He left." I reply while opening a jar of salve.

"Strange, he said this would be his post for the duration of this task. Now, hold still, Miss Delacour."

As Poppy starts her diagnostics, I hit Fleur's lower arm with a Numbing Charm. Peeling back the charred sleeve, I inspect the damage. Her normally creamy skin looks like a sun tan gone bad. She flinches reflexively when I start applying the salve, despite not being able to feel it. I look up and give her a reassuring smile.

"Nothing serious down here. You'll be good as new by the morning." Poppy nods and agrees with my assessment.

"The question is will it be just in time to serve Krum his breakfast?"

I chuckle, "At least he didn't specify what you had to wear. I'm going to borrow one of my mate's commemorative Irish National Team Quidditch Champions jerseys. Want to borrow it when I'm done?"

True, Seamus doesn't know I'll be borrowing it yet, but when have the details of a clever insult stopped me?

Fleur smiles at my underhandedness. "Hopefully, his score will drop below mine and the only thing you'll have to worry about is buying my lunch. Now, if there is nothing further, I shall go out and view my tally."

I follow her with the idle hope that I still somehow edged her out. The crowd gives her a cheer. It's larger than mine, but I suppose deafening half the crowd probably was a tactical error on my part. Karkaroff unveils a four, staying true to his slimy, misbegotten form.

Diggory and Bagman award a pair of eights and Maxim ignores the end and gives Fleur a nine. Dumbledore offers up a seven.

Thirty-Six beats thirty-one - damn it to hell!

"Congratulations, Fleur. I hope it holds." I offer up trying not to sound the part of a sore loser who cast more than one spell and didn't get his arm burnt.

"I should have done better. I am surprised that your score was that low."

"You and me both. I didn't want to go with my other strategy." The Welsh Green is finally removed from the stadium and they're making preparations to bring in Krum's Ridgeback.

"Interesting. How far in advance did you know about this?" she accuses me.

"Probably about as far in advance as you did. Secrets are notoriously hard to keep around here." Technically I was the one that told her, but that is neither here nor there.

"I see. So what was your other strategy?"

"Beat the living snot out of it and take the egg when I was finished."

"And why didn't you do that?"

"I'm an animal lover. Didn't seem like the right thing to do - just a tad cruel. I thought about just dropping stones on it from fifty or so feet in the air."

Fleur cringes slightly. "Yes, I suppose so. Do you think the rest of the eggs in the nest are real Dragon Eggs?"

"Probably not, they're probably just engorged chicken eggs, but given the ignorance and poor planning that runs rampant in this tournament, I wouldn't be surprised. Bollocks, this has probably been the safest I've been after one of these events so far."

"You probably shouldn't jinx it then."

"Good point. So when is your sister coming back? Such a... delightful girl."

"She's in the stands today. My mother insisted she go back to France for the holidays. I'll tell her you asked about her—it will make her day. I thought older witches were your more your taste, though? Isn't Gabrielle a bit young for you?"

"She is, but it never hurts to be polite to people."

"Aimee admits that she is trying to push you at me."

"Really? I'm a little younger than your usual fare, Fleur."

She continues facing forward, but glances at me out of the corner of her eye, "You are. Oh look, Krum's dragon appears to be rather surly, doesn't it?"

"It's a safe bet that the dragon won't be awestruck by Krum's star power. So, what are my chances?"

"Not good. You should stick to pursuing Aimee. The two of you would be a good match. Or perhaps one of your English witches? They are far more likely to be enamored by your... what did you call it? Ah, yes, star power."

"She seems stuck on that boyfriend of hers. You, on the other hand are patently unattached, attractive, and equally annoyed with those chasing you for your star power as I am with all those tittering witches who believe that I'm the anointed one."

Fleur tilts her head away from me in thought before musing aloud, "So you suggest, we take each other off the so-called market? I can see how dating me would enhance your stature, but other than driving off the weakest of my weak minded suitors how would I possibly benefit from dating someone three years younger than myself?"

"Well, at the end of the year when you return to France, and I'm still here in England, we become the 'Stephan' excuse for each other that Aimee is currently using. What witch here could compare to the woman I'm waiting for on the continent? Furthermore, what French wizard would risk the ire of Harry Potter, Winner of the Tri-Wizard tournament?"

Openly laughing, she answers, "There's a slight flaw in your plan, Harry. I happen to be back in first place. You might not actually win this tournament and your ferocious stature will be diminished by your runner-up status. Perhaps 'Fleur Delacour, Winner of the Tri-Wizard tournament,' will scare off enough men by itself. Besides, what happens when I find a man that I want?"

The banter is everything I'd hoped for. Both Fleur and Aimee are very quick-witted women. "Who says you'd want another man? Aimee's rational for staying with Stephan was that you and I are legends. Those don't come along everyday."

"A fair point, but let's assume I do find someone I'm interested in upon my graduation. Then, I become the shameless witch who broke poor little Harry Potter's heart. I have an undeserved reputation as a heartbreaker, already. I intend to leave you in my wake in a competitive sense, not a romantic one."

"Interesting, since this is the first challenge that I have legitimately lost to you, you seem quite willing to write me off."

"I would have won the broom race regardless and you are forgetting our staff duel."

"Probably, but we'll never know about the broom race and I don't honestly consider beating each other up with sticks to be much of an event. Do you?"

Her answer is drowned out by the cheers for Viktor Krum entering the stadium. I ask her to repeat what she just said.

"He is a legend in our generation, as well. Should I date him?"

I'm sorely tempted to tell her that I once heard her say something to that effect, when she was looking for a way to get under my skin - no less. Of course winning that particular point would force me to reveal my Animagus skill. "If that's the kind of wizard that gets you going, he hardly seems the type to sit, watch you race, and cheer you on. I enjoy Cedric's success as much as you do Aimee's. Can you say that Viktor and Athena are that friendly?"

"Interesting point, Harry - it doesn't change the fact that you're too young. Try again when you're seventeen and I am twenty. You have a great deal of potential, but now doesn't seem like the right time."

As Krum receives the start signal, I shrug. "I might not be available when you're twenty."

"Yes, but that's the chance I'm willing to take."

I chuckle, "S'okay. I'm very persistent, or at least that's what I'm told."

Fleur sighs. "I have far too much experience with persistent males who refuse to take no for an answer. If anything, it will sour my opinion of you."

I let the matter drop and turn my attention to Viktor. On Krum's third Conjunctive Curse, he hits pay dirt and the Dragon is flailing around in anger. He taps his arm and casts a spell near the base of the nest. A stone arm juts out of the ground and deftly reaches into the nest grasping the egg. He cocks his arm as if to throw a Quaffle and hurls it to himself. The whole thing took a little over a minute, but a few of the eggs were crushed, so that might tamp down his score. Still, I should think about borrowing that jersey from Seamus.

"Wonder how many times he practiced that throw?"

"Indeed," Fleur agrees. "That looked very well rehearsed, didn't it?"

"Well, he is used to performing in front of a crowd. Guess you'd better find out what time he wants his bacon and eggs."

Krum walks slowly holding his egg aloft like an over sized snitch, taking something of a victory lap instead of the direct line to the medical tent.

"How many people would spot a well-placed Tripping Jinx?" Fleur asks, indulging in a personal fantasy.

"Too obvious - the green wouldn't blend with the rocks. You need to think blue energy or colorless. Take a Slug Spitter—that would blend in nicely and the sight of him suddenly overcome and losing his lunch might curb that ego of his."

She turns her head for the first time and looks at me. Obviously, pranking isn't a big part of the Beauxbaton curriculum. "I was speaking in jest."

"As was I; he can have his victory today. It'll make beating him that much sweeter."

Fleur doesn't say anymore as Krum walks by. "Like I said, dragons are nothing to me."

"So's basic hygiene, Viktor. For best effect, it helps when you use soap."

Okay, I wasn't prepared to hex him in front of a full stadium, but that doesn't mean I'm going to let his ego get away without a bruise or two.

"Potter does have a point. You could make more of an effort." Krum's angry glare spins towards Fleur.

Well, well, well. I'll have to credit Miss Delacour with an assist on that goal.

Krum ended up with eights from everyone except the ten from Karkaroff. Obviously he missed those broken eggs. Unless one of the others really steps it up, Fleur's first place in the overall competition was over before she could properly enjoy it.

I've honestly never wanted Athena Manos to kick some serious arse before now. I'll settle for the next contestant, which happens to be Aimee against her Ironbelly.

She enters the stadium. "Any idea what she's planning?"

"How should I know? We just learned of this today," Fleur answers with mock sincerity.

"I thought witches shared everything."

"You obviously spend too much time thinking about witches." Aimee starts with Krum's tactic of blinding it. Instead of flying into a rage like the Ridgeback, the Ironbelly crouches low and protectively over her nest. From the corner of my eye, I see Fleur biting the bottom of her lip—nervous on her friend's behalf.

If this rattled Aimee, she doesn't show it. She charms several of the stones near the Dragon and we watch several smaller ones hover over the larger rocks. They begin to strike the rocks in a rhythmic pattern. I nod my head in approval as she moves with every rock strike. She's masking her approach with noise. Aimee follows this with a rope conjuration. She immediately charms the rope. Judging from the length, she's going to have to get about fifteen feet away.

The Ironbelly sweeps her head from side to side searching for the elusive quarry amidst the noise. Aimee stops and charms another set of rocks to increase the noise on the opposite side and the dragon snaps her jowls in that direction and sends a gout of flames that way. That species isn't known for a powerful breath attack, but more their thick armor, large claws, and serrated tail.

It's a dangerous game of cat and mouse as Aimee cautiously approaches the large beast. I become absorbed in watching, barely noticing Fleur's soft prayers. She engorges a rock to use as a shield and slips behind it. Slipping her wand into her opposite hand she takes the rope and eyes up her first throw. With her off hand she transfigures a rock into a small dog that immediately starts barking at the beast. The Ironbelly breathes fire on the poor mongrel and Aimee

makes her cast. It lands a few feet from the nest and starts slithering into the nest.

A second dog is transfigured near where the first one died as the rope coils around the egg and begins to draw taut. That canine dies just as fast and the dragon repositions to fend off threats from that direction. The back left foot moves forward and contacts the rope and the egg is dragged up and on to the top of the clawed foot!

Instantly, the mother dragon reacts and rounds on Aimee. Fleur's shrieks join the crowds and I sense her pulling her wand out as molten fiery death spews right towards Aimee. My wand finds its way to my hand and the golem spell is on my lips. Time slows as the arcing stunners from six dragon handlers sluggishly head towards the beast. Under my golem conjuration, the rock shield shudders and starts to gain shape, but the flames are already beyond it.

I hear Fleur's summoning spell and feel the power behind it, but see a second fireball erupt just above Aimee's screaming form. I know what it is and push Fleur out of my way to get back into the tent.

"Poppy! Incoming!"

The words leave my mouth as Fawkes appears in the tent carrying the screaming witch and drops her on the bed.

Poppy immobilizes Aimee, cutting her off in mid-scream. I'm already at the bed. A Smothering Charm from my wand douses the flames on Aimee's robes. Her face is a horrible mess with skin sloughing off at Poppy's touch.

"Potter! Check the burns on her chest and arm. I'm on the airway."

I vanish away the tattered robes and start a diagnostic charm. The burns are bad. Dragon fire has that quality. "Third degree on her chest. Accio salve! Her arm's shit!"

She might lose the arm, but that's the least of our worries at the moment. Aimee's discolored chest is frantically rising and falling

despite the Immobility Charm. Poppy confirms what I fear. "Her mouth's a mess. The fire got inside. I'm doing a cut and bubble."

Her deft wand movements open Aimee's throat and a second later a Bubblehead Charm covers the wound forcing breathable air down her throat. I conjure a paint brush and have it slathering salve on Aimee's chest while I work on her blackened arm.

Dumbledore arrives via Fawkes. A wave of his wand pushes Fleur, Krum and several others right out of the tent rather forcefully. "Poppy, how is she?"

Poppy looks up from her position over Aimee's ruined face. "It's bad."

"Fawkes can take her to St. Mungo's."

The nurse shakes her head. "We can't move her. Send Fawkes to bring them here. Tell them it's a level one burn."

I run my wand over her arm and a greenish hue spreads up the arm and chest. It's getting progressively darker - which is very bad.

Poppy cancels my charm and recasts it. "Damn it to hell! She's not getting enough oxygen even with the charm. Her lungs!"

When Poppy curses, the situation is about as bad as it can get. Aimee's suffocating because her lungs are fried. She's pushing air in and out, but the air sacs are destroyed.

There's only one answer for this. I charm my robe off. "Do the Dykstra shuffle."

"You're too young! Albus?"

The old man and I share a glance. This has nothing to do with Voldemort's hand—I think. "I agree with Harry. He's the right size. I'll handle the switch. Your services are needed to save the girl."

Poppy nods and slices open Aimee's left side, exposing it. Her next wave controls the bleeding and she looks at Dumbledore.

Memories of trying to save Benjy Fenwick flood my mind. "I can only say that this will be incredibly painful, Harry."

"I took Yaxley's Crucio well enough. Do it."

Like many healing spells and rituals, this one has its roots in black magic. Dykstra was a wizard who liked his drink. He ruined five livers after his own failed. He'd simply take one from someone else. It's a switching spell for body parts—my left lung for hers.

I hear that Muggles do similar things, but their operations last hours. This one takes long enough for Dumbledore to open my left side and cast a switching spell - twenty seconds max.

Using Occlumency, I keep my shrieks of pain down to a dull roar as I feel like Hagrid is clubbing my chest with a beater bat. Albus immobilizes me. Of course they can't just stun me. I have to stay alert and match my breathing with Aimee's.

Tears flow freely down my eyes as I concentrate. Nothing matters but the rise and fall of our chests. Poppy recasts the diagnostic charm and the blackish-green color begins to pale, indicating she's getting an increased amount of oxygen into her body. It's working.

Fawkes arrives with a pair of healers and supplies. Both give me appraising looks when Poppy mentions Dykstra. One casts the same diagnostic charm on me to ensure I'm breathing well enough, and they quickly start going over Aimee's laundry list of injuries while enchanted quills take dictation. Items are summoned from their emergency kits. One creates a list of things they need from St. Mungo's and they give it to Fawkes, who disappears yet again.

Time blurs and loses meaning—maybe thirty minutes, maybe twice that. It only hurts when I breathe, which would be every few seconds. Somewhere in the middle of this, they say that Aimee is stable enough to finally move. I'm released and allowed to crouch at the end

of the bed while the entire bed is animated and walked to the castle. Dumbledore uses charmed bed sheets to hide what's going on.

I hear Fleur's desperate wail. "Let me see her! Is she okay? Let me see her!"

Dumbledore's voice carries a deep sincerity, "I understand your concern. Miss Beaucourt is being cared for by some of the best healers in England. Please give them the time to do their job."

Swathed in salve-soaked bandages, Aimee resembles something closer to a mummy instead of a witch. There's nothing to see here; please move along.

Once in the infirmary, one of the healers releases my right arm and hands me a mask. It has a vial of Phoenix tears attached. "Mr. Potter, we need to start fixing the lung inside of you. Please begin breathing through this and let the healing power of the tears commence."

Reminds me of an asthma inhaler a kid used to use back when Dudley and I were in school together. I take a long breath from it. "I could use a Numbing Charm."

He gives me a sad smile. "In another hour, perhaps, but we need to be able to have you tell us where it hurts. Her burns are too severe. She needs to be kept sedated while we fix her lung."

He leans over her face and opens her mouth. With a small brush, he begins applying more tears to the inside of her mouth. He scoffs, "Children against dragons, for entertainment!"

"Will we need to shuffle her other lung?"

"Probably, but we'll get a second volunteer to do that one. I applaud your courage, Mr. Potter. You have done more than your share."

"What's next?"

"We'll get some skin grafts on her. Someone's supposed to be bringing some live pigs up here to flay shortly."

Here I thought I'd gotten my fill of animal cruelty today, but she needs the skin more than they do. Of course the original creators of that spell were more selective about where they got their skin from – Muggles. "And after that?"

"We'll start her on potions to prevent the spread of infection. She's definitely not out of the woods yet. Let's hope that she's the only person I end up treating here today."

We talk about her long term prognosis, while I watch him skin the pigs and transfer it to Aimee's wounds. He's impressed with my depth of knowledge. "When I heard Poppy took you on as an assistant, I thought she'd gone mental, but you're very perceptive. Given any thought to Healing as a profession down the road? If this salve of yours is any indication, you've got a bright future ahead of you. It's easily hospital grade."

In the distance, we hear the cheers from the stadium indicating that the competition has started anew. Athena and Cedric still have to finish the day. The other healer leads Aimee's parents in along with the chief administrator of France's magical hospital. A bit of territorial posturing goes on while Healer Douglas briefs them.

Madame Beaucourt is France's Interior Minister, roughly the third most powerful individual in that country, behind Fleur's father and their Minister. She's ill-suited for the position of anxious parent.

"Fine, prepare her for travel. We will take her to France immediately."

"That would not be wise," Healer Douglas says preparing himself for the forthcoming argument.

"I do not believe I was speaking to you, Englishman, but since I am now, release my daughter to my personal physician's care at once, so that I may take her back to France where she can be properly cared for."

"Not while my lung is in her body, you won't." She'd have to forgive my surliness. I'm in a good deal of pain.

"Very well; bring the child too."

"I'm afraid we haven't been properly introduced. I'm Harry James Potter and I go with no one. Who the hell do you think you are?" I'm probably doing wonders for Anglo-French relations—like I care.

"I am Minister Bernadette Beaucourt, young man, and you would be wise to watch your tongue!"

"Pleased to meet you, Madame. We're a little busy here, so perhaps your physician can handle the cranial-rectal extraction, and then explain what a Dykstra is and why we're not going anywhere for the next twenty-four hours."

The woman flares with anger and can't believe a "mere child" just addressed her so. Too bad Hat isn't here. We could be at war by the time the weekend was over. I'll blame the pain I'm in, but part of me enjoyed that. She's French, condescending, and a politician. That's more than enough for me. Her healer and husband literally drag the sputtering Minister out of the room begging her to calm down.

Healer Douglas looks at me. "If you truly want to be a healer, you'll need to work on that bedside manner. It's atrocious."

"You don't approve."

"From a professional standpoint, no. That said, you have a way of dealing with bureaucrats that leaves me green with envy. It's safe to say that no one will ever run roughshod over you while you are an attending healer. Cranial-rectal extraction, indeed!"

A significantly less volatile Mister Beaucourt returned and received the assessment of his daughter's condition.

Oddly enough, he neither addressed, nor looked at me during this period. Hermione, Ron, and Neville were allowed to come in and

speak with me for a quick five minute period and I learned that Athena took second place by gorging her dragon with transfigured animals and letting her spells lapse. All that juicy meat in the dragon's gullet reverted to rocks and the beast collapsed in agony with a painful stomach condition. Charlie, Hagrid, and the rest of the handlers were forced to pump the stomach of a Hungarian Horntail. No doubt Hagrid was thrilled.

Cedric finished fifth and took a few nasty burns for his efforts, but nothing life threatening, though he'd have that freshly-salved smell following him around for the next few days.

Suddenly, I'm three points behind Krum, and tied with Fleur for second place. I'm on Doze-Away Prescription Strength Anti-Sleeping Potions. If I manage to sneak a few doses into my robes, I could make a small fortune with the seventh years as NEWTs get closer. The good news is that Healer Douglas made good on his Numbing Charm. I have been released from my paralysis and am resting on a comfortable chair at Aimee's bedside.

Dumbledore smiles after shoos my classmates out of the infirmary. Fawkes flies from his shoulder and lands next to me. It looks at me as if to say "what are you waiting for." I begin stroking the feathers as it trills contentedly.

"I'll send you over a book on caring for a phoenix. Fawkes continues to groom you as my replacement."

"Maybe he just likes me? He? Here's a question for you: is Fawkes a he or a she?"

"I've never figured that out myself, Harry. Fawkes just is. It exhibits traits of both sexes: prideful, vain, and a long, long memory for every possible slight against it, both real and imagined."

The phoenix snorts at this and looks at me. I'm uncertain whether it's to deny the accusations, or to chide me because I wasn't currently petting it. Somehow, this reinforces Dumbledore's point.

The Headmaster starts again. "Several of the Beauxbatons students will be coming by shortly to see their classmate. They have been briefed not to block your view of Miss Beaucourt." He pauses and adds with a subtle laugh, "They have also been warned of the folly of annoying you."

"I'm more agreeable now that I have a Numbing Charm and can take pain potions. They know she's being kept unconscious, right?"

"It never stopped people from visiting you," he adds, with a twinkle in his eye.

"Touché. Very well, send them in. Before I forget, why did you only give me a nine?"

Dumbledore smiles and gestures for Fawkes, who chirps a quick goodbye. "You were off-key and, most importantly, it should be a crime to cover any song by the Rolling Stones song other than Ruby Tuesday."

"Everyone's a critic."

Author's notes – Well, I hope you liked that installment. I always wanted to do an intense magical "medical" scene and put my twist on healing magic that most of it is inherently Dark or evolved out of sinister purposes. Hopefully, the HJ and Fleur interaction was good even though no major boundaries were crossed. Join me on the forums at Darklordpotter and Fanficaauthors for more conversation about this story. Visit my profile for details on where and when you can get your hands on my original work.

Disclaimer – Just another fanfic.

Acknowledgements – As always, the help from the gang at Alpha Fight Club is worth noting. I'm giving my betas the rest of the year off, because I'm a cool guy!

Chapter 18 – A Prayer for Forgiveness

In small groups, the wizards and witches of Beauxbatons gather around their fallen champion. In a way, I feel like I'm something of an interloper. Some of the witches are under the illusion that my act was this noble offering of love to Aimee. This is compounded by the fact that word of my encounter with her overbearing mother has already spread. Dumbledore would be proud. I'm on my best behavior. I merely say that I was in a great deal of pain when the confrontation occurred and what they have heard has been likely distorted by the gossip spreaders.

Most congratulate me on my "unusual" tactics with the Dragon and one even professed to believing that there might be something of a bias when it comes to scoring these events. Imagine that!

Since I'm not going anywhere in the near future, I do my level best to be chipper and friendly to them. I listen to their words of encouragement to the unconscious champion and see more than a few tears shed. It makes me wonder about how many people have passed by on my numerous occasions in this infirmary. As James, then Harry, and finally HJ, I've spent a rather inordinate amount of time here - too much in fact.

Madam Maxime leads the students in and out. The last group is a group of one, Fleur. Up until now, the part Giant witch hasn't said anything directly to me. She leads the ashen Delacour to Aimee's bedside, towers over me, and clears her throat.

"When you were included in the tournament, I, like everyone else doubted you and took joy in the opportunity to add another champion. In hindsight, I should not have been so eager to offer up another person to these games. It is a sobering reminder that these lives are entrusted to my care. Thank you, Mr. Potter, for your actions to save

Aimee. Should you ever require something from me, do not hesitate to ask."

I thank her as she turns to Fleur. She leans down and kisses her on the top of her head and says, "Take your time, and stay as long as you need, dear. You know the way back to our quarters."

Maxime retreats and closes the door behind her, leaving me alone with both the French champions.

"How are you holding up, Fleur?" I ask.

"Were we ever to face Dementors again, I know what I would hear - the sound of her screams." She answers, dabbing some moisture from her eyes. "It happened so fast and when you pushed me aside, I almost lashed out at you. Of course, as with the Dementors, you were already in control of the situation and once again I was left trying to figure out what was going on. You have a gift."

I put my palms on my knees and lean forward, "It's no gift. It comes from too many life and death situations. Remember our conversation about the whirlwind - this is what the aftermath can look like."

"I think I'm beginning to understand." She pauses, searching for some words, "Thank you for saving her. Though I was cast out of the tent, I could still listen to the conversation and know that it was you that insisted on the procedure, regardless of the personal risk."

"If you listen to Poppy, I have an obscene tolerance for pain and a distinct lack of common sense. Either way, Aimee is a good person and a friend. I never considered myself in jeopardy, because I have faith in both Dumbledore and Madame Pomfrey's abilities."

Fleur looks away, "I am ashamed that I was of no use. I couldn't get her out of the way in time and then I panicked."

"You had good instincts, Fleur. You tried to summon her out of the way. Even Dumbledore's phoenix couldn't get there in time. My rock animation only spared Aimee's legs and stomach from the flames. Learn to keep moving no matter what and don't stop. It's when you

stopped and processed the horror that you froze. That's the part you have to beat - don't think, just do."

"You make it sound so easy. They say she has a long road ahead of her."

"Yes. She'll have to undergo several rituals, but with enough time and money, she'll eventually recover. Dragon fire is nasty business. They saved her arm, but she may never have the full range of motion that she used to and it may affect her broom racing. She may even have to relearn how to speak, that'll probably be the hardest thing to do. How is she at sub-vocalizing her spells?"

"Better than most, so she'll have access to her magic."

"Good, from everything I've read, losing the ability to perform magic makes recovery harder. It leads to depression. She is lucky to have such good friends and will need both support and encouragement."

"You sound like you intend to be a healer. Or a professional duelist. Or a broom racer. Or a Quidditch player. You seem to have a world of opportunities in front of you."

"I'm not ready to commit to anything yet." I pause and chuckle before saying, "Perhaps I'll do all four."

I don't bother with the reality, Death Eaters reconstituting, Riddle trying to both kill me and get a body back, and other omens on the horizon. My future looks an awful lot like James Potter's seventh year, except he made the choice to abandon his dreams to pursue his parent's killers. I'm lucky - I don't get a choice. I've got a nifty prophecy.

She smiles oblivious to the sarcasm running rampant through my mind. "I would say that is impossible, but I'm learning that you seem to define your own limits."

We sit for a moment before she changes the topic, "I used the Floo system to contact Stephan. We had a rather heated conversation."

"I'll bet. Is he coming?" It would have been interesting to hear that one.

"Yes. It is far more than I expected out of him, although I am still uncertain of his motives. He could just be coming to save face or because of Aimee's family connections. Speaking of her family, you don't seem to have made a good impression with her mother. She sent for me, which is why I am the last visitor of the evening instead of the first."

"I suppose I was a bit abrupt with her, but to be fair, she didn't exactly impress me either."

"She is one of the most politically powerful people in all of France."

"This is the part where I shrug indifferently and remind you that I'm Harry Potter. I'll be civil if she is, but because I choose to be, not because I have to." Though I wouldn't mind having the Beaucourt family as allies when Riddle does return, the brat in me refuses to pucker up and kiss any arse at this point and time.

"Yes, I suppose you are Harry Potter. Krum has postponed collecting on the wager we made, out of respect for Aimee's recovery."

"Postponed?" I answer. "That's positively big of him. Did he do it privately, or did he alert the press first?"

It's the first genuine laugh I've heard from her since she arrived. "It was somewhat private. There were a few members of his entourage around. I don't think he would ever consider cancelling it."

"That's what I have come to expect from him. Of course this gives him time to properly devise a scheme to suitably humiliate us. I should bring Peeves along for entertainment while I serve him. That would go over well."

She ignores my statement. "Speaking of things worth reconsidering, I think I will take you up on your offer of a date or two."

"Really?" I should be more excited, but somehow I'm not.

"Yes."

Yeah, somehow this is striking a raw nerve. "The only thing that's changed since our conversation is Aimee and if this is some kind of 'thank you' for saving her, then I'll have to say no thank you."

She looks stunned almost angry. "What?"

"Remember what you said about being seen as the person breaking 'little' Harry Potter's heart? That broom flies in both directions. I'd be the guy who takes Aimee to the Ball and ditches her when she's injured for her better looking friend."

"They know she has a boyfriend."

"Sure they do. You didn't see them in here earlier. Most of your classmates have this romantic fantasy about me and Aimee. If I'm down in Hogsmeade with you, people will say what a cad I am and I don't need that right now. I wouldn't mind dating you Fleur, but I want it to be for the right reason and not out of a feeling of obligation."

"That's not it!" her voice rises.

I answer flatly, "Yes it is and you know it. Listen Fleur, I've been doing a lot of thinking up here, since I can't sleep. It occurred to me that I've been repeating a lot of the mistakes my father made. My whole tactic for the Dragon was something right out of his playbook. The other thing he was known for was chasing the unattainable and I think that's what I've been starting to do with you. Don't get me wrong, I appreciate the offer. If you really want to go out on a date with me, wait a month and let this all calm down. If you still want to at that time, I'll be happy to go, but right now, I'll have to pass."

I'm in uncharted territory here. It's not like James ever had to be the mature one in a relationship. He'd likely be trying to figure out how he could shag Fleur and still keep an eye on Aimee.

Mirrors, I could probably do it with a conjured mirror or two. They'd have to be placed right and she'd have to be on top...

Delacour looks embarrassed and frustrated. Not too many people in their right mind would give her the brush off. Padfoot will give me no end of shit when I tell him. She stands and smooths her skirt. "I should go."

"No, stay. Spend time with her. Talk to her and ignore me - or even better, tell me some stories about you and Aimee. It will probably make you feel better as well."

By late afternoon on the next day, the diagnostic spells show that Aimee's lung inside of me is functioning well enough to be switched back. Apparently, this Stephan bloke is waiting in Paris and has graciously "volunteered" to do the second procedure - wanting to be the first thing she sees when she wakes up.

I guess I shouldn't be so down on the guy. He could be a decent chap. Then again, he's a male under the age of twenty - decent doesn't really describe any of us.

A second volunteer, named Fleur, is set to travel with them in the off chance that complications occur. It's kind of sad, but I don't get a chance to say good bye to Aimee, since she'll be kept sedated through all of this. All I can do is sit there and softly hum The Air That I Breathe, that old Hollies song that Lily liked, and wait to be cut open again. Dumbledore is on hand, but has deferred to Healer Douglas in this matter. If I had my druthers, I'd rather the Transfiguration Master undo the switch, but I understand his "ruffle no feathers, unless necessary" style. It's got him this far in life. The twinkle in his eye and, more importantly, the phoenix on his shoulder reassure me that he has things in hand.

Funny how in the middle of a life and death situation, I had no jitters whatsoever. Want to rip my lung out and switch it with a defective one? Sure! Go right ahead. Now, with everyone meticulously planning every step of the procedure, I'm having doubts. If nothing else, Hat will get a good laugh out of it, while mocking me.

I catch Fleur's eye and give her a brief wink as Poppy removes my robe and gets me prepped to have my left side cut open. Yet again, I bemoan the fact that I haven't started taking any aging potions. I've got some decent muscles, but not even the slightest hint of chest hair. Could I look any more like a fourteen year old?

"As you well know, Mr. Potter, this will hurt quite a bit. Prepare yourself."

I nod and wonder if, when I turn seventeen and can legally perform all the family duties, I should change the current family motto to that.

"Are you certain that you feel okay? We can stop if you need to catch your breath." Hermione is "mothering" me all the way up the staircase.

"Yes," I answer. "I'll be right as rain in a day or two. How did you do in the knowledge bowl round last night?"

"They were going to cancel it, but the Beauxbatons students insisted on taking the stage. We beat them, but lost the other round. The topics were Dark Arts and Potions."

"Dark Arts or Defense Against the Dark Arts?"

She shrugs, "Dark Arts. Since the Beauxbatons course is called 'Understanding The Dark Arts,' the questions seemed to be weighted more towards that rather than defense. Charms and Herbology are up next and I do believe that we will be well positioned to deliver some payback. Are you looking forward to the first Quidditch match this weekend?"

"Honestly, I hadn't given it much thought. I went ahead and let Cho borrow my Firebolt for the matches and Cedric is practicing against her." Even though her lip reading skills didn't generate any further incriminating evidence against Karkaroff and Snape, it seemed like the thing to do - a deal is a deal, after all. With Malfoy being the alternate for the Hogwarts squad, I made certain to tell my Ravenclaw friend to watch her back.

We step up to the Fat Lady and I mumble the password. She just smiles at me and shakes her head.

Hermione nudges me, "Professor McGonagall changed the passphrase - Heroism is not measured in points, but deeds." The portrait opens while she smirks, "I do rather think there's a message in there, don't you?"

The common room is decorated and there is a small party in my honor. I smile and act pleasant, while recalling that, other than the seven students in my year, most voted to censure me right after my name popped out of the cup. It's funny how everyone loves a winner. Wonder how long this time will last?

"Thanks for finishing where we expected you to, Potter. It helped get us back into the black." One of the twins says.

"I guess the lemonade stand is out for next time. Pity, I was looking forward to it."

"Piss off George! Only scary thing you've ever seen is Mum on a rant and you run for it. Harry here makes a joke out of facing a Dragon. Speaking of which, aren't you going to open the egg and get your clue?" Ron asks, mouth half-filled with a squirming chocolate frog.

George slinks away. It's kind of amusing seeing Ron get the better of one of them, he's actually enjoying seeing the "clown princes of buffoonery" getting schooled because of all the terrors they visited on him when they were first learning the subtle art of pranking.

Hermione, Neville, and several others urge me on, so I crack it open and hear the most awful shrieks coming from it. I get it closed under the glares of my slightly less friendly house.

"I had no idea it would do that." I protest. True, I have a penchant for making loud noises, but for a change, this one wasn't my fault.

"How in Merlin's name are you going to figure that out?"

I shrug and pretend I don't know the answer to what Ron is asking. In JP's days, it was fashionable to have a dip in the lake. There aren't many who do that these days. Either way, I don't speak Mermish, but I know what it sounds like when one of them is chasing me, Peter, and Sirius back to the surface and hurling obscenities at us when we made it to shore. There might have been a juvenile bet involved, but that's beside the point and the record will show that James was correct when he stated that female merfolk do not have pubic hair.

Merfolk means that I have to do something under water. Let's hope they don't hold grudges against family lines.

A few hours later, I'm looking at the Hat, perched on top of my bed instead of the Golem body. "So they're going to take a treasure from me, I rescue it, and bring it through an obstacle course. Where do you think this one is going to go off the rails?"

"Tough to say, especially with how the screw ups seem to be getting worse. If they're leaving it up to the Merfolk to provide the only security, they're asking for trouble. They better damn well not put me under the water! What are you planning to do?"

"Well, I'm looking to get back into the overall lead for the tournament. So, I guess I'll concentrate on being fast and not flashy."

An announcing charm hits the outside of the wards surrounding my bed. I open the curtains and peer out at the face of Remus J. Lupin. He looks impassive.

"Who's there, HJ?"

"Lupin. Should I tell him to go bugger off?"

Hat cackles, "Spread the word - there's a werewolf in the tower. Run for your lives, stupid humans!"

"Nah, I guess I should see what he has to say."

I step out of the barrier. "Hello, Lupin." He's been on my mind a lot. I did some deep thinking about how I was going to handle him on our next encounter.

He does a fairly impressive privacy charm. One Lily taught most of the Order. "Hello, Harry. Or should I call you, James?"

Hadn't planned on that one, I pause for a moment and process it.

"How'd you figure it out?"

"While you were recovering, I did, in fact, go to France. Sirius was always fairly loose-lipped, when he thought that everyone else was in on the secret. I simply told him that you'd confided in me. Don't forget, I was a Marauder as well and sometimes the easiest way to discover the truth is to let someone else assume that you know it. Your reactions to my comments about James make more sense now, as does everything else."

"Well, congratulations are in order. You now know why I wasn't jumping for joy to see you. You deserve a biscuit, governor."

The king of all awkward silences follows next as we just stare at each other not knowing what to say. Much of what I'd thought of doing was based on keeping him in the dark. Now, I just have to wing it.

He turns away, "Sirius always says how ashamed he was that he convinced you not to make him the secretkeeper, and how guilty he feels. At least he can freely admit his guilt. He's a better man than I am."

"No arguments there. It does explain why you never checked in on me - something that bugged me last year." I feed his guilt a little. It's probably petty on my part, but I have my flaws as well.

"Yes, it does. I was reluctant to come and teach here last year, but the fear that Sirius would harm you overrode that. For what it is worth, I'm sorry."

"You'll forgive me if 'sorry' just doesn't seem adequate. Honestly, I don't know what to think, Lupin. First off, I'm not James. Let's make that crystal clear. I might know every single thing he did, right down to getting you your first piece of tail from Beverly Parkinson in fifth year, but I'm not him. I'm not really the Harry you met last year, either. I'm just me - pure and simple. I tried working up the anger that James felt when he walked in on you and Lily playing stuff the sausage, but I can't get that kind of rage like when he hexed you and threw you out of their house. It just doesn't reach that level. You're just an arse, not the arse that slept with my wife or mum, or whatever the hell she is to me."

"What do you mean?"

"I'm still trying to work it all out, but one thing I know for certain is that I don't have the level of attachment to Lily that either James or Harry did. Harry thought his parents were the greatest thing ever, since that's all anyone ever told him. I know too well, they were human beings, who had real problems."

He nods, agreeing with me and giving me room to finish my little rant.

"Because I'm not James, I can see that he was virtually abandoning Lily to go out on missions for the Order and all the training he was doing. You and Lily might be the most to blame for what happened, but I can say that James had a hand in what happened too. We both know that no one could ever make her do a damn thing that she didn't want to. She became obsessed with her rituals and finding a way to protect our family. Of course, by the time the two of you tracked down the Fidelius charm, there was barely a family left to protect. Trust me, there's more than enough guilt in that clusterfuck to go around."

"I initially thought that James had left you a diary or some memories to be viewed in that Pensieve you won, but I hardly believed it when Padfoot said that you had all of his memories. So, where does this leave the two of us?"

"That's a good question. There's plenty of reason to hate you, and make no mistake, we're definitely not 'okay.' Still, I have all the

memories of the good times, too. I say we start off on a blank slate and you earn my trust again. Dumbledore and his staff can't actively help me, because of this ridiculous contest, and my solo training can only take me so far. I need someone I can get in a dueling pit and really fight. Bad times are coming, Lupin, and we both need our edge. I also need to get whatever this is out of my system before I can ever think of trusting you with my back. Let's call it a fresh start with a Marauder twist. It will involve pain, humiliation, and quite possibly a broken bone or two. I fully intend on beating the living shit out of you. How about it - willing to get a bit nasty?"

"That sounds acceptable," he answers without hesitation. "Mind if I ask how good you really are?"

"As soon as I figured out that James was a lefty, I started correcting everything about my spell casting, and it all fell into place. I'm already at James' level and maybe a touch beyond. Where do you want to do this? Dumbledore is letting me keep the lab I was using as a private workshop. How about I clean it up this week, layer some soundproofing charms, and you comeback next weekend and we see if you can last five or ten minutes?"

He scratches the scruff on his chin, "I have a better idea. How about you come to the Flamel estate next weekend? There's a nice regulation dueling pit there. Padfoot was boasting about how well his dueling coach has been getting him back into shape. She won't be there this weekend, otherwise you could test yourself against her as well."

Remus is right. Naturally, Padfoot will want in on it. He'd be upset if we left him out.

"Yeah, I heard he was more interested in shagging her, but maybe he'll be a good dessert after I finish with the main course. You're both on. Everyone will be at the Quidditch game next weekend. Meet me at the Shrieking Shack - the Ministry was kind enough to license me to Apparate, it's about time I make use of it."

He nods and we shake on it. Next weekend will be little anger therapy and horseplay - Marauder style. The only question now is do I let Dumbledore know I'm sneaking off to France, or do I just go?

James would have just gone. Harry would have been too scared to even risk it. HJ, well I'll give the old man a courtesy call, letting him know that I'll be taking in some private lessons this coming weekend, and not to look very hard for me.

"Might I have a word with the Supreme Mugwump?" I ask casually, catching Dumbledore on his way back up to his office from the evening meal as we wait for the staircase to realign.

He chuckles, "It is a rarity when a student can address me thusly without fear. Then again, you are not the usual student. What can I do for you Harry?"

"Nothing really, I believe that the rules of this tournament forbid such things, but it is possible that one of your braves might be going off the reservation, so to speak, this weekend. Speaking hypothetically, would this be a problem? No surprise tasks suddenly popping up on the horizon and such?"

"Quite a lot happening this weekend with the Quidditch match. I don't believe the individual champions have anything to worry about. With everything going on, even someone as famous as you could get lost in all the festivities. Although, it might leave Poppy out of sorts, if her assistant were not available to help tend the various injuries involved in the match, but I'm certain she could get by. Of course, I'd never approve, but I would have to wonder if a student were to go missing, where might he or she be?"

"I hear France is a lovely destination this time of the year. Among other things, there's a young lady recovering from Dragon burns there and seeing a friendly face might aid in her recovery."

He nods sagely and continues our non-discussion, "Indeed, a most wonderful country. I myself find the guest quarters at the Flamel

estate to be most accommodating. I hear one of my former staff members, who stopped by for a visit recently, is enjoying them at the moment."

"Really? What a coincidence. Small world, isn't it?"

"I do believe you are correct. Well, it was nice spending a moment with such a promising young student, but I really must be going. Sometimes, when I get in such a rush, I find it difficult to remember all the details of a conversation. I'm glad we had this opportunity to talk, Harry. Do forgive me if I don't seek you out this weekend, I do appear to have my hands full. Don't spend all weekend sequestered in your workshop - remember to get out and enjoy yourself some."

"Sound advice, I'll keep it in mind. Good night, Headmaster."

"Good night, Harry."

Wrapped in my invisibility cloak, I slip inside the private room reserved by the Beaucourt family.

Her head and right arm are still covered by medicine-soaked bandages. Considering that is her wand arm, her recovery will be increased by the time it takes for it to be healed. The one eye not covered by bandages is closed.

After casting a quick privacy ward, I rest my palm on top of her undamaged hand and see the eye snap open. It darts around for a second.

"Relax Aimee. It's just me, Harry Potter. I was in the neighborhood and wanted to stop by and see you."

Her hand brushes mine off and picks up a quill. In crude characters she scrawls on a piece of parchment, "Ou est tu?"

"Under an invisibility cloak. The people downstairs said you weren't receiving visitors. I don't take no for an answer. I'm glad I left the

Sorting Hat at the place where I'm staying. Who knows what it might have said?" I pull the cloak back so she can see my disembodied head.

She replies with a squiggly rendition of a smiley face.

"I'll skip the 'How are you feeling' bit. I always hate it when people ask me. You're obviously on drugs for the pain, so, I'll skip ahead to, is there anything I can get for you?"

"Dragon Liver - Ironbelly."

At least she's kept her sense of humor, or the potions they've got her on are making her a bit cheeky. Either way, it'll help. "When's your first surgical ritual scheduled?"

"Next week."

"That's a little soon. What are they doing?"

She shuffles a piece of already scrawled on parchment and points to a sentence. I translate it into, "Trying to fix my arm, first." I also notice the, "I love you too, Stephan" at the bottom of that conversation.

"Good to see you're boyfriend is standing by you. I heard he was here to do the other part of the procedure to fix your lungs. For the record, I was against moving you until we had rehabilitated both of your lungs."

She points back to the smiley face and then writes, "Merci beaucoup."

"Well, it wouldn't have looked good in the press if I had just stood around twiddling my thumbs. Of course, the next time things get a bit dicey, they'll be the ones with unreasonable expectations." I blush a little, but in the weak light of the room, I doubt she notices. Damn, I hate being a teenager sometimes.

She points to an expensive floral arrangement and I read the note. It's a simple get well wish from Athena Manos.

"Nice of her. I left some flowers at the front desk. Someone will probably bring them up in the morning and it was too large to fit under the cloak. I'm sure if Krum does anything, it'll be with his official photographer around."

Her stomach shakes a little and there's a slight gurgling noise. I worry for a moment, but quickly realize that she's laughing or, at least, trying to laugh.

"Sorry, that probably hurts. I'll do my best to keep the humor to an acceptable level. By the way, I might not have made a favorable impression on your mum, but you've probably heard that by now."

She points at the top corner of her previous conversation where the word "Oui" is written.

"Well, when you get better, I'll show you the memory. I've found it rather amusing. It's probably not my finest moment, but it does make me laugh. Is there anything I can do for you?"

Aimee writes, "Look after Fleur. She will be lonely and sad."

"I will do my best. When I am not crushing her in the tournament, I will be supportive."

She shuffles to another previous conversation. I spy the line, "You and Harry would make a good couple. The age thing shouldn't matter." followed by "He turned you down!" Her finger thumps on that several times.

"Well that wasn't quite the whole story. We were having quite an interesting discussion up until your injury. She in fact turned me down, only to reconsider after your injury."

Aimee scans the page and points to a question mark.

"What I did was for you and not some grand gesture, designed to win her affection. I told her that if she still wants to in a few weeks, or a month to ask me again then."

"You wasted an opportunity."

"Maybe, but if she agrees, I want it to be for the right reasons."

"Stubborn idiot."

"Don't hold back - tell me what you really think. I'm assuming you mean me and not Fleur."

Her stomach quivers again, accompanied by the gurgling laugh. After it subsides, she writes, "Both!"

"I suppose you're probably spot on in that assessment, but if nothing else, it should provide countless hours of entertainment for you. I'd like to stay longer, but I need to be off. There are some other matters I need to attend to and this trip isn't exactly sanctioned." I kiss the back of her hand and turn to leave.

Pausing, I add, "I could tell you something else that will provide even more laughter for you, but you must promise me that this remains a secret."

She points again to the "Oui."

I lean very close to her ear and whisper. "I always keep telling you I'm full of surprises, but one of the biggest ones is that I am an Animagus."

Her head tilts slightly and I can't tell whether she's caught on yet or not.

"I suppose I should tell you my form, it's a pronghorn. Do keep this between the two of us and get well soon."

Either she's having some type of spasm, or she is amused. Maybe laughter is the greatest medicine of all.

Far from humorous is what is happening Saturday morning. The area surrounding the dueling pit is littered with dead animals, chunks of stone, spatters of blood, and a few things that it isn't worth my time to try and identify.

Remus banishes the smoldering carcasses of my Pettigrew horde off the narrow bridge separating us. Once it's off the connecting path or the individual dueler's circles, it's out of play - a very messy style of dueling called a "heap duel," which somewhat limits retransfiguration, but usually a crowd pleaser.

Even if our crowd consists of four people and a magical hat at the Flamel estate.

Give the werewolf some credit. He's gotten better over the years. Part of me is happy to be really "cutting loose" against someone other than a schoolager. Our duel has already closing in on the ten minute mark.

The other part of me wants to pound him into the ground.

A slicing gesture from my wand sends a trio of darts at him head on. I add a set of wings to one of them and go for a "drippy pincushion." At this distance, the wings are small enough that he might not notice them.

He blows them away with a gust of wind, but my winged one immediately zips back towards him. Lupin spots his mistake, but I'm sending direct frontal bludgeoning attacks, while the dart is coming in from an angle - bad situation for Mr. Moony. He slides to his right and "takes" the dart in his left shoulder rather than risk one of my bludgeoners.

Add another blood spatter or two to our match. Without missing a beat and maintaining his shield, Remus pulls it out and crushes the wings. Seconds later he discards it off the side of the pit and into the "Heap."

Effing werewolf always did have a high tolerance for pain. Still, he's bleeding from four places and I've only got one mark on me - a scratch on the arm from a piercer I "mostly" avoided.

I'm wearing him down and we both know it. Quick cutters and piercers zip my way - ye old "nick and poke." I dodge and shield them looking for the next attack window. He won't yield. Unlike Padfoot, he isn't great at tracking multiple targets, which is how James usually bested him. He's been leading with powerful spells and quick follow ups, which is, of course, how to best duel James Potter. JP always put too much into his attacking spells or first shield, and was a soft target for a quick follow on - ill prepared for when his opponent weathered the attack.

He still has his same weaknesses, but it's time he realized the reason we're dueling instead of actually fighting is - I am not James Potter!

I snap off a couple of quick jinxes to steal back the initiative and start in on the heavy bludgeoners - nicknamed "Troll Love Taps." Lupin pours his energy into a Mage shield, but I've got the power to spare. JP did it with style and finesse. I can do it with power and brute force as well. The third one cracks his shield and the fourth powers through it, knocking him off the platform. The fifth one flies over his head.

Sirius Apparates over to Lupin's side and begins checking him over. "A little rough there HJ. You could've cracked a rib."

"It's okay, Sirius. I agreed to let him go all out." A weary Remus answers while trying to get his wind back. "You didn't exaggerate when you said how good you were. Those children in the tournament should be grateful that you can show a modicum of restraint."

"The Manos girl is good. She's got potential. You okay?"

He answers me, "Nothing hurt but my pride."

"Good, when can you go again?"

"Harry!" Sirius exclaims.

"I won't be able to get out and have real duels all the time. I need all the practice I can get."

"Give me six hours, and an invigorating draught, and I'll be up for another session."

I switch my wand into my left hand and offer him my right. He takes it and I hoist him back to his feet. "Fair enough. Mister Padfoot, I do believe that it's your turn. Let's see whether Emmeline's cousin has gotten you back into dueling shape or just shagging shape."

"Don't you want a rest first, Harry?" If I didn't know any better I'd say the old dog was a bit frightened.

"No, it'll level the playing field for us. Heap rules or no heap rules?"

He scratches his beard, "No heap. Let's see if after all that you can still conjure, transfigure, and retransfigure."

Black was always decent at transfiguration, close to JP's league. My guess is that he's going to try to wear me out.

We'll see about that...

Much later, I limp into a private parlor for a rather unexpected meeting. Still, I'm in much better shape than the werewolf and the mutt, who are licking their wounds in their respective bedrooms after a brief stop at the infirmary. The woman before me has an ageless beauty, well almost ageless. Perenelle Flamel is a petite woman with long silver hair and penetrating green eyes that have likely seen and forgotten more than I will ever know. I wonder if Dumbledore feels like a firstie around her as well.

"Good evening, milady. Your hospitality is appreciated." I have no idea what level of formality she is accustomed to.

"Well, at least Brian is still teaching manners in addition to violent dueling - a shame to see how warlike the world remains. Thank you

for coming young man." She motions for me to sit and a glass of wine appears in front of each of us.

It takes me a second to realize that by "Brian" she means Dumbledore. "Sadly, the world requires both these days."

"Very true, but in the centuries that define my existence, I have seen both times of prosperity and Armageddon wax and wane like the tides. One way or another, Harry, this too shall pass. Brian speaks very highly of you and I've been following your exploits in the tournament."

"Thank you. The Pensieve alone is worth more to me than the eternal glory promised to the winner."

She laughs and sips a shimmering glass of wine, "That old relic? I was glad to see it leave. Serviceable? Yes, but not my best work. Still, I hope you find it useful for years to come. I hear Godric's Hat is with you. I suspect that dear Nicholas would be turning in his grave at the thought of it in our home."

"My apologies, I did not know..." I should have left it in England. The blasted thing sure has a reputation.

From her simple, but elegant chair, Lady Flamel waves off my comment, "It is of no consequence to me. I just find it amusing. I will send someone for it later and wouldn't mind a brief chat with it. Something not widely known, and not exactly recorded in the annals of history, is that Nicholas briefly filled in as Headmaster of Hogwarts in the early sixteen hundreds. It was only an eighteen month period, a veritable blink of the eye to me, but The Sorting Hat left a definite impression on my husband and was part of the reason dear, sweet, Nicholas chose not to stay on and, come to think of it, rarely visited that castle."

My mind stashes that little tidbit for the next time I need an exceptional piece of trivia to impress Hermione. It's probably not even in her favorite book! "I recall hearing some of the Beauxbatons students saying that he was also the Headmaster at their school."

"And New Salem for a decade and a few others. There was a time in his life when he had a passion for teaching. I even taught a few classes here and there. Brian introduced me to your mother once - a delightful young lady, charming and quite eager as I recall."

I nod, digging around JP's memories and recalling Lily gushing about meeting the Flamels shortly before the wedding.

"You're probably wondering why I asked to meet with you, are you not?"

"Naturally."

"Since I was part of the group that helped bring back the tournament, I've been following it closely. I'm sorry to hear about your lady friend. How is she doing?"

"Recovering in Paris. I visited her last night. She has many rituals ahead of her, but I know she will eventually make a full recovery." I answer.

She pats a stack of periodicals, "The society papers seem to believe that there is romance in the air between the two of you."

"No, I'm afraid not. Aimee is a good friend, but there is no romance at the moment."

My hostess purses her lips in thought and reaches some decision. "Perhaps not now, but maybe in the future. I had hoped to provide some immediate assistance. Brian was so very lonely when he faced his greatest tests, but perhaps this will serve you well, down the road."

She shoves an ornate wooden box across the table to me. With her encouragement, I open it. A small non-descript potion vial is nestled within the material inside.

There's a sinking feeling in my stomach. "Is this..."

"The final dose of my husbands potion, yes - The Elixir of Life. I had the foolish notion of you going to young Miss Beaucourt's side and restoring her to health mere days rather than the months and sweeping her off her feet. It's the kind of ending that an old witch, who believes in love stories, always yearns for."

"But without it, you'll die."

"We all die, young Lord Potter. My great love has already left me and I have no real wish to continue. I will last perhaps six more months before I return to his embrace - hopefully enough time to watch you win this tournament."

It's a humbling experience. Snape's boasts of brewing a potion and stopping someone at death's door pale in comparison. This potion would slam death's door shut, dismantle it, pack it in a shipping crate, and send it away for a few decades!

"I appreciate the gift, but I shouldn't."

"Nonsense. I have no further use for it. I would like you to have it and put it to good use. My husband always felt that his elixir shouldn't be wasted on others, but I hold a different view and it is my opinion that now matters. You can heal your friend, another, or perhaps save it for the dark times Brian fears are coming soon."

I play the idea of me healing Aimee with it in my mind. It's a good scene, but it's not the best scene. There's one other scenario that might just top it.

"Milady, can the elixir treat wounds that are mental in nature?"

"It does restore clarity and mental sharpness. Why do you ask?"

"I have two ... know of two people, who were tortured into insanity. Their son is in my year. Could this potion hold the key for them?"

"How long ago did this happen?"

I cautiously answer, "Thirteen years ago."

"I cannot say for certain whether it would work. For the best possible result, you would have to use the entire dose on one of them. I have my doubts whether a half-dose would achieve the desired results. I believe Brian asked a similar request from my husband and was chastised for it. You would do well to ask him. Sadly, this is the only dose left. I wish there were another."

"It is more than enough. Words alone can not express my gratitude."

She stands with the aid of a cane and kisses both my cheeks. "Good luck and a long life, Harry Potter."

Padfoot and Remus are resting in a parlor, being tormented by the Hat, when I find them in a bit of a daze.

"What did she want, Harry? Harry? Are you okay?"

"She gave me the last dose of her husband's potion."

"The Elixir of Life?" Padfoot says slightly gobsmacked.

"No, his special blend of mouthwash - of course she gave me The Elixir of Life!"

Remus sits up and puts aside the ancient text he was attempting to read. "What are you going to do with it?"

Hat becomes interested, "Yes, HJ. What will you do with it? The Beaucourt girl would certainly be grateful..."

"Yeah, but I was thinking more about the Longbottoms. Lady Flamel thinks it might work. I'll have to ask Dumbledore what he thinks."

Sirius smacks his leg, the one not covered in bandages from a burning hex. "That'd be brilliant, Potter. Frank and Alice would be a welcome sight!"

"Well, there's the rub. She said that the best chance of it working would be to give all of it to one of them, so it's not Frank and Alice. It's Frank or Alice."

The sobering reality hits the two of them. In all likelihood, I can only save one and not the other. "Guys, which would you choose?"

"Frank." Sirius says without hesitation, "He was a damn fine Auror and we'll eventually need every wand we can get. Alice was ... is a sweetheart and decent with a wand, but she's a housewife. He was a force to be reckoned with."

Remus looks pensive and thinks on it a moment before saying, "I'm less sure. I'd be happy to be able to speak with either of them, again. I recommend you ask Albus what he thinks and then take a day or two to reach a decision."

We talk for a few more minutes before changing the subject. There are a few walks down memory lane and a couple of laughs. Sirius breaks out the Firewhiskey and the brandy, but I pass, citing my young body and my long trip tomorrow. The reality is that I don't feel like drinking right now. After a few minutes, I beg off and head to my room.

Laying down, I try to sleep - a futile effort. I could probably blame the aches and bruises from the dueling sessions, but the real reason is that little wooden box. I pace for a short period before starting a fire in the Floo and tossing some powder in. Might as well firecall him and ruin his evening too. If I'm having problems sleeping because of this, I think he should as well.

"Hogwarts Headmaster's Office!"

"Welcome back to England. You're looking refreshed, Harry. After our discussion, I slept fitfully." Dumbledore's tired voice greets me as I step into the long term spell damage wing of St. Mungo's. He's admiring Lockhart's crayon drawings. Upon seeing me Gilderoy lights

up and pulls one of his pictures out. Looks like I'm about to get an autograph. Maybe I'll give it to Hermione for a good laugh.

"I charmed a mirror with a reflective shield and stupefied myself - poor man's dreamless sleep."

The old man smiles and replies, "I haven't done that in years. The trick is to make certain you position the pillow right."

Looking around I say, "I'm glad you didn't bring Neville, since this might not work. Getting one of his parents back is a blessing, but having to be around to decide which one gets the chance isn't something he needs to be burdened with."

"Agreed, Nicholas refused on both occasions when I asked him to let me try this and I swore an oath not to use the stone when he allowed me to hide it."

"Why wouldn't he help an ally?"

Dumbledore sighs. "History mischaracterizes my relationship with Nicholas. He never intended that his greatest achievement become a panacea for all that ails this world. His long life left him rather disinterested in the quarrels of mankind."

"He took up his wand against Grindelwald," I remind him.

"True, but only after I repelled Gellert's minions, who also sought the stone, did the war command his attention. As for the Longbottoms, when I asked him directly, he told me rather bluntly that if I wanted it so badly there was nothing preventing me from making my own stone - other than my lack of talent in that area. The second time, I made the mistake of asking his wife first and hoping that her support would convince him. Ultimately, Perenelle was the only one who held any influence in his life, but my ploy caused a slight row between the two, which led to his refusal and a warning to never again ask him."

"Sounds like a petty arse to me."

"Perhaps, but I choose to believe that immortality distorted his view of life. He looked on us the way a normal person would look on a family pet, such as a dog. Even one, such as myself, would only be around for a short period, but then pass on to the next life. Then he would have to concern himself with getting a new 'dog.' The process became rather tedious for him."

The thought of Dumbledore being treated like a family dog is an odd one. I try to picture it while he continues, "I also have another theory - a far more disturbing one, the Elixir might be actually quite easy to produce and once the secret is unleashed, our world be effectively destroyed. Perhaps we should save the final drops and attempt an analysis. It is worth considering, but extreme caution must be exercised. But enough about my less than stellar relationship with the Flamels, let us move on to the matter at hand. On thing that worries me is that the potion might only provide a temporary reprieve. Its effects could eventually wear off. We may only be giving one of them some borrowed time."

"How long?"

"Nicholas guarded his secrets jealously, which is why I know so little of its design. My best guess is that it would last a few years and then there is a chance that Frank or Alice would suffer a relapse. Hopefully, that is just my overly cautious nature speaking, but whoever you decide to give it to will have to prepare for that possibility."

"These are the kind of things that kept you up at night during the last war, weren't they?"

He nods and I glimpse the weary warrior hiding behind a façade of twinkling eyes.

"If you would like, I'll gladly remove this burden from you and make the selection."

"I appreciate it, but it falls to me. Leaders make tough decisions and I might as well start now."

"Regardless of your choice, Harry, you have already made the right decision. A lesser man would hoard the potion, but this is a selfless and commendable act. We both know the phrase 'the lesser of two evils,' but there is no wrong choice in this instance, so, at worst, it might be the 'lesser of two goods.'

I try humor and point a Lockhart. "We could always bring him back. He's a junior member of the Dark Arts Defense League, after all. How does one get a membership to that club anyway?"

"I believe you write a few papers, attend regular meetings, and send a small pile of currency each year - all the prestige money can buy. I was offered membership at a reduced rate, but opted to spend my coin at my brother's establishment instead. At times like this, it helps to have a brother that owns a bar, both for the drink and the ear."

It's good for a laugh even at this somber moment. I weigh my choices. Frank would want me to save Alice. Alice would want me to save Frank. Neither would want the other to have to suffer this. Neville deserves the opportunity to get to know the real man behind all of Augusta's foolish prattling and step out of Frank's shadow under the tutelage of the man himself. Then again, he could use a mother's love, something he's been denied all these years. I have memories of desperately fighting Voldemort with Frank, Alice, and Lily by my side and being bloody amazed that we all somehow survived. Frank the pragmatic thinker and Alice the quintessential optimist - one gets a chance at a new life.

Harry used to pray for someone to come save him during those long years in the cupboard and one day his prayer was answered. James never really had much use for seeking guidance in higher powers. Before me are two souls, trapped in their own cupboards and praying for a rescuer.

I pray that the one I select will forgive me for picking them over the other. I pray that Aimee never finds out that I could have healed her injuries, but chose to take a chance on something that may not even work. I pray that I'm doing the right thing for the right reasons.

Someone once said, "Lead, follow, or get out of the way." The last two are easy.

Opening the wooden box, I remove the vial and uncork the stopper. I tell Dumbledore who we're giving the potion to. He nods, accepting my decision, and helps me hold their mouth open. Nothing happens immediately, but even powerful magic takes time.

All that's left now is to pray that it works.

Author's notes - I hope everyone has a wonderful 2009. Yes, I left it vague at the end on purpose and part of the sequel could be influenced by the choice HJ makes. In TML, Dumbledore is a complete and utter bastard. In this one, he gets a much more sympathetic treatment. I've also seen stories where the Longbottoms come back, but never one where Harry has to make a choice on which one to save - if in fact the elixir works, but I wanted to show HJ maturing as a leader and forced to make a difficult decision.

I'm back on TML starting tomorrow. This one was in my head and demanded that I write it. Plus, I figured that I could get this chapter out before 2008 ended as a bonus for you readers. Visit my profile for news on my soon to be released original works.

Disclaimer – Just another fanfic.

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Chapter 19 – Out of Africa

"Enough of this angry introspection, Potter! It's beginning to wear on my nerves. Quit moping about whether you did the right thing with Flamel's elixir. You need a good shag to get you back into the swing of things. You should go see if the Head Girl has reconsidered her position and is up for another session of tutoring. After Hogwarts losing their knowledge bowl round to Beauxbatons while you were in France, she might be a bit more receptive."

I lower the book I'm reading and regard the Sorting Hat. I hadn't really given Melinda Turpin much thought since our one night stand. I mull over the idea of using my cloak to catch up to her on her evening patrol.

"No thanks. I probably could use a shag, but tracking her down and then convincing her is more trouble than it is worth. Anyway, most of the birds around here wouldn't understand the concept of recreational sex. They'd want to date and have a relationship and I'm not really interested in that."

"Except when it comes to Delacour," Hat chides. "You'd be willing to play stuff the sausage with that."

I don't bother denying it. "She's here until June. It's only just turned February. If she asks again, I'll date her and the chips will fall where they may. I want to see if she's really warmed up to the idea of dating me, or if it was a knee jerk reaction after what happened to Aimee. Besides, I remember how James made a fool of himself chasing Lily and let's just say that I'm not going to let history repeat itself. You know something? For a magical object over a thousand years old, you don't really have much patience, do you?"

"That depends on your perspective, HJ. I sit around watching all these worthless losers doing the same idiotic things the losers three centuries ago did. You have the opportunity to rise out of it and break the mold, but like a spineless maggot, you fall right back into your same patterns."

"Bee in your bonnet, Hat?" I mock it using the words it once said to me.

"I'm bored. France was a breath of fresh air, both figuratively and literally. Cooped up, back in this dank Scottish castle irritates me."

"Well, what can I say, Hat? No one's tried to kill me this week, but if you give it time I'm sure something will come along to make things more enjoyable for you. I could ask Dobby to take you to see Oliver, if you feel the need to get out and about?"

"Only if the elf cleans his flat first. If Wood ever develops an Animagus form, my guess is that it will be a pig."

I shrug indifferently, set down my copy of Unfathomable Magic: Spells Guaranteed to Work under all Seven Seas, and say, "With this task coming up in just over a day, I don't have time to take you on a walkabout. You could always ask Fawkes to take you somewhere."

"It'd likely drop me in a live volcano!" Hat scoffs.

Spending a moment enjoying that image, I start to answer when the aforementioned bird appears out of nowhere. It drops a note and disappears, leaving both of us stunned.

"What does it say?"

I scan the writing and reply, "Dumbledore's invited me as a guest to a party he's holding tonight. It looks like he's getting together the Order. See, you thought tonight was going to be dull. Maybe we'll pickup something interesting."

Picking it up, I climb out of my bed and head down to the common room.

"Where do you think you're going, Potter?" Angelina Johnson growls as I reach the portrait. "Curfew is in five minutes."

Others in the room look up from their conversations to see if anything comes of this little exchange. I search the room for Fred and George and don't see them. I shoot Hermione a quick smile and swing open the Fat Lady's painting.

"The Headmaster requests my presence, but you can feel free to verify that with our Head of House when you see her next. Do have a wonderful patrol, Prefect Johnson."

Somehow my sarcastic tone doesn't sit well with her, but I couldn't give a shit.

The gargoyle looks at me and then glares at the Sorting Hat before slowly moving aside. I get a familiar sinking feeling in my gut.

"Alright, what did you do to it?"

"You were the one who gave me a powerful golem body, HJ. Did you expect me not to use it?"

"Do I even want to know? Is that where all those claw marks came from?"

"Minor cosmetic damage at best. We do still need to discuss upgrades to the golem."

"Spill it! What did you do?"

"I stopped by to visit Dumbledore, there was a minor disagreement, and I might have spackled the gargoyle's ass shut. Like it's functional anyway!"

I sigh wondering what kind of monster I've unleashed on society. "And what did it do to you to bring this about? Should I even ask why you had a bucket of spackle on hand?"

"It was something long overdue. Leave it at that. Now, if I can only figure out a way to get my revenge on the damn bird."

Wisely deciding to let the matter drop, I climb the stairs and actually hear the gargoyle growl.

"Albus! He's just a child! He doesn't belong here!"

"Dear, I'm sure the Headmaster knows what he's doing. Hello, Harry."

I reach out and firmly grasp Arthur's hand, remember to not address him by his first name, and try not to react to Molly's "all too predictable" outburst. From the last time around, she did it when the Marauders joined, when Marlene McKinnon joined, and when anyone under the age of twenty-five joined. Then again, considering how many of those whose membership she opposed are now dead, maybe – just maybe, Molly had a point.

"It's good to see you, Mr. Weasley." I scan the room and already feel Moody's eye on me. There he is, next to Kingsley Shacklebolt and Andromeda's daughter. He looks like death that no one bothered to warm over, but I suppose spending a month or two under the Imperius curse can do that to someone. No Snape? For that I'm both surprised and delighted.

"Harry is here in an observational position. I assure you, I have no interest in exposing him to any further harm, but at the same time I also know that Harry is quite capable of taking care of himself." Dumbledore answers in a gentle, but commanding tone. I'm guessing he'll get an earful later. Then again, that's why he's the leader. I'm content to just be the chosen one at this time, thank you very much.

Both Bill and Charlie Weasley are in attendance as well. It's probably got Molly on edge knowing her oldest are already caught up in this.

With Fred and George spending all their time trying to be the reincarnations of Fabian and Gideon, I'm sure that has nothing to do with her anxiety level. She's probably assuming that Ron and Ginny are coming through the door next.

I recognize most of the other members of the old crowd. They look nervous and unready. That's not a good sign. I don't spot Lupin either. He must still be in France.

"I still think reactivating the Order might just be a tad premature," Sturgis Podmore says. "Sure, there was the incident at the Quidditch World Cup, but I haven't heard of anything since then."

Some murmured in agreement.

Dumbledore gestured for silence. "But there has been activity, dear friends. I would not be asking you to meet me here if there were not a reason. Most of you know that Harry was entered in the Triwizard Tournament by a renegade Death Eater impersonating Alastor. What you do not know is that that Death Eater was Barty Crouch, Junior."

"But he died in Azkaban!" Diggle protests.

"So we were led to believe, but I saw the body." Dumbledore explains as I wonder how much he is going to reveal.

"Thank Merlin you stopped him, Alastor." Molly adds.

Moody's eye rolled in his socket, "I wouldn't mind taking credit, but it wasn't me that did the deed. The papers just printed the story the way they were told it. They played it up that Potter and I teamed up to stop him when the truth is that it was a solo act all along."

Arthur's hand squeezes my shoulder in support as Molly utters a small gasp. I do my best to remain impassive.

Dumbledore speaks, "Indeed, Harry is a gifted wizard and most unfortunately, a target of the remaining Death Eaters, and their Master, who I assure you, is seeking a return from his quasi-life."

I read the faces and don't like the denial I see. Dumbledore explains the possession of Quirrel three years ago and glosses over the Chamber of Secrets incident – focusing on how quickly Lucius acted to remove him as Headmaster. The revelation that Sirius Black is innocent and Pettigrew alive doesn't sit well either. Minerva looks as if she just ate something foul when Dumbledore mentions Trewlaney's prophecy that the rat would return to his master.

"This is the second prophecy that we know of that she has successfully made. I will tell you all a portion of the first which I am certain is known to Lord Voldemort and many in his Inner Circle."

He repeats the first two lines and one by one, all the eyes turn towards me. Over my shoulder, I hear Molly snifle. It's kind of touching – albeit in an awkward way.

"If you want awkward, I can give you a few disturbing mental images," Hat threatens.

"It is my hope that Harry will not have to face Lord Voldemort anytime soon, but we must be prepared for that inevitability. What we do know is that Peter Pettigrew is alive and we have every reason to believe that he is now aiding his master. Since Pettigrew is knowledgeable of the last incarnation of the Order of the Phoenix, I need all of you to begin gathering information. From my interview with the still recovering Barty Crouch, Senior, I know that his son was working with others and in a worst case scenario, it is Peter Pettigrew and Lord Voldemort. A slightly less damning possibility is that it would be Lucius Malfoy or other former Death Eaters."

"What do you want us to do, Albus?" Arthur speaks up. Again, I know he's not much with a wand, but the true measure of a man is not the power of his spells, but how he responds to adversity.

"Arthur, I need you and everyone else who is employed in the Ministry to keep abreast of things. I need to know the comings and goings of former Death Eaters and those we previously suspected. I need the names of at least two people that we can approach in the Department of Magical Transportation. The ability to monitor movements of our enemies may yield rewards down the line.

Kingsley and Miss Tonks, I would ask you to keep tabs on the Auror force for both possible recruits and potential threats. Minister Fudge is most certainly not Minister Bagnold. He is a dangerous politician and is known for his sense of self-preservation. He will act in his best interest first before considering what is right for society. When push comes to shove, so to speak, we cannot count on the Ministry to act accordingly. That said, he has increased next year's budget for the Aurors and authorized larger class sizes, which can be seen as his way of playing both sides of the fence."

Moody agrees in his own fashion, "Of course, it'll be three full years before any of them will be actual graduates and any failures in the meantime will be put at the foot of Bones, since she got sacked."

"Quite right," Dumbledore states. "I will be trying to make inroads with Cornelius as time goes on, but there is no reason to believe that we will receive any help beyond what occurred during the last war. Now, moving to those outside the Ministry, many of you may not know William Weasley, other than as Arthur and Molly's oldest, but he is a Cursebreaker at Gringotts and he will be doing liaison work for me to monitor the mood of the Goblin nation. It is no secret that I will soon be the heir to the Flamel estate, which will significantly enhance my monetary holdings. I intend to use that status to arrange several one-on-one meetings with the Gringotts manager. Despite this forthcoming windfall, I am quite certain that it pales in comparison to the amassed fortunes of Lord Voldemort's Inner Circle."

People digest the news. Some are probably wondering if we're going to get paid this time.

"Next to William are Charlie Weasley and Elvira Podmore who are Dragon Tamers on the continent. They will help with foreign recruitment. As for the other magical races, I have a pair of emissaries in France already that I will use to make contact with the Giant clans there. I suspect a good portion of my inheritance will go towards buying their neutrality. As for the Merfolk and the Centaurs, their neutrality is virtually assured, but I am working diligently to bring them under our banner. I do know that they will, at the very least, keep the forest and lake surrounding this castle relatively free of Death Eater activity."

"Remus and Sirius are going to see the Giants? I would have thought he'd send Hagrid along."

The Hat spares a mental laugh, "The idea of Hagrid conducting any kind of negotiations should send a chill down your spine. I'm not entirely certain he can order a beverage correctly. Lupin being a dark creature and Black's outlaw status would actually improve their stature with the Giant clans. They'd treat Hagrid like a half-breed runt."

Dumbledore continues and introduces a few notable business owners from Diagon Alley, who will keep an ear to the ground there. One is an intern at the major potion's supply warehouse and he has a list of specialty items to be on the watch for should they start being ordered in large quantities. For a cold start, Dumbledore's network is much better than I anticipated.

Another face steps forward out of the shadows and I'm somewhat gobsmacked. "This young lady may not be familiar to you, but you've likely read her byline. Miss Penelope Clearwater's status as a journalist should allow her to travel in high society social circles and quite literally report what she sees. I caution you that if war does break out, the ability to tell our side of the story will be quite useful. Public opinion is dominated by the Daily Prophet, but Miss Clearwater has gained considerable notoriety in her own right."

She smiles at me and I wonder if Ollie's going to be recruited as well. Dumbledore gestures to me, "Finally, there is Harry. I am asking him and some others to carefully monitor the mood of the school along with my Heads of Houses. Children are marvelously perceptive individuals. After receiving correspondence from family members or a visit during a Hogsmeade weekend, they are barometers of what the outside influences on the student body might possibly be. With so many others in the castle this year, it is especially important to measure the pulse of the student body as it were."

Hat whispers in my mind, "Long winded, doesn't begin to describe him, eh HJ? No wonder he's always sucking those lemon drops. Do you want to know what else I think he sucks?"

"Not particularly. I didn't need that image, thank you very much. Still, at least he's treating me as a member and not just any kid off the streets. It should help them accept me."

"Do you actually believe that, HJ?"

"I guess not, but one can always hope."

Unfortunately, the Order was never a smooth running machine and the meeting starts to degenerate from there – much like every other Order gathering that involves more than six people. There are far too many people in the room that enjoy the sound of their own voice. After Diggle's third comment on the importance of Floo security, I'm about to throttle him. Three hours later, I finally head back to my room for some well deserved rest.

"So what was last night all about?" Hermione pounces on me the moment I come downstairs into the common room.

"Can't really talk about it here – let's just call it news from afar."

She mouths "Sirius" and I nod. Technically he was mentioned, so I'm not lying to her. It probably wouldn't hurt a bit to tell her what's really going on. I have no doubt that Dumbledore will recruit her at some point or ask me to do it, but honestly, she already puts enough pressure on herself and I'm not ready to add to her burden. She should go snog Roger and have some fun ... while there's still time.

Come to think of it, I should do that as well. The have fun part that is. Davies does nothing for me.

"It's nothing to be worried about right now, so don't." Another almost truth as we grab Ron, Parvati, and Lavender to complete our breakfast party. In the last war, Riddle didn't really try to disrupt the student body, but last time his target wasn't a student. I suspect this time will be much different.

Funny, I hadn't pictured Ron and Parvati lasting, but they're going on six weeks now since the Yule Ball. I caught him asking her for help with his Divination homework the other night. It was downright humorous to watch young love in all its awkwardness.

I guess miracles can happen. The five of us start out into the passageway when a voice catches up to us. "Can I have a word, Harry?"

"Hey, Cedric. I'll catch up with the lot of you later."

We wait until they've moved on before I look at him. "What can I do for you today?"

"Have you figured out the egg clue?"

"Yeah. You?"

"Finally broke it a few nights ago. Drat, I was hoping to repay you for the tip about the dragons. So, you know what you're going to do?"

"I've got a general idea, but I'm still working it out."

Cedric nods and says, "I caught wind that some of the third years were planting tangle vines in the forbidden forest. My guess is that going down to the Merfolk village is only the start."

"Yeah, you're probably right. Just going and getting something from the lake seems a bit simplistic. They need to muck it up and add two or three different ways the challenge can go wrong."

He searches for a proper answer to my sarcasm, but can only come up with a shrug. I motion for him to follow and we trade small talk. I ask him how he and Cho are getting along and he makes a polite inquiry on the behalf of one of Cho's friends about my dating status. Edgecombe's not exactly my type, plus she loses points for sending Cedric to do the dirty work.

Diggory's theory that there is more to it proves to be true as the champions are summoned to Dumbledore's office thirty minutes before the task begins. It seems strange not seeing Aimee or her advisor here. Fleur looks intent and slightly lonely. I know she's been making trips to visit her injured friend. The other foreign champions have also been away. I'd heard Krum got back last night. He'd gone to some kind of family function on the continent, so the repayment of that bet is delayed yet again. Athena also was allowed to leave and she looks well-tanned. Beaucourt's injury has had a far reaching effect, forcing everyone to reevaluate how seriously they take the competition. There is a certain tension in the air. I'm almost tempted to see what bawdy joke the Hat has on its mind.

Almost.

"This is a trial of speed, wit, and precision. In the center of the Merfolk village, you will find five pillars. Tied to each one, is a bag containing potion ingredients and instructions on what to do with them. How you retrieve it is up to you, but you may only take one bag and may not tamper with the others. Next, you must reach the shoreline here." Dumbledore gestures to a map of the surrounding area and continues, "Once there, you will need to use those ingredients to craft a potion. It is an Egyptian brew, fairly rudimentary, but not on the curriculum of any of our schools."

Okay, so far get some ingredients and make a potion quicker than the others. Dumbledore's smile tells me that there is much more to it.

"You have only enough ingredients to make one attempt at brewing the antidote to the sleeping potion that has been given to a person who has volunteered to be your hostage. If your potion fails to wake your hostage, you will be at a decided disadvantage as you must then navigate one the five trails with a sleeping person slowing you instead of helping you. There is no flying in this section of the competition. You must travel by land. The shortest and most direct path is a trail through the forest. All the routes are roughly the same distance and have been ensnared. These traps will seek to delay you. The hostages do not have their wands, but are allowed to use yours. The finish line is at the front gates of this castle. First one to reach it will be declared the winner."

He goes on to say that safety monitors will be stationed in the Merfolk village and others will be following along with the broom riding crowd and I learn that my hostage is none other than Miss Hermione Granger. That little fact causes a slight alteration in my plans, assuming that I don't bugger up the potion.

They dismiss us and we have twenty minutes to get down to the lake. I don the Hat and update it on what I plan to do. It mocks and derides me, as expected, but agrees that the approach is good.

It's apparently "Bring Your Own Broom Day" at Hogwarts as the skies are filled with riders. I can't be certain if the crowd was bigger for the broom race, because so many were in the stadium. Suffice it to say that a good portion of Magical Europe is in the skies overhead. We each touch these floating balls that will ride on the surface of the water and mark our positions for the crowd. Mine happens to be the Gryffindor red and Diggory's is Badger Black.

I toss the Hat to the Headmaster and move into position next to Fleur. She spares me a brief smile and I return it along with a question. "How's Aimee?"

"She's doing well and in good spirits. The first surgical ritual was a success. She will have another in a few days. I hope to be able to attend that one as well."

"Good. Send her my best."

Her pretty face acquires a look of mock seriousness. "I should also mention that she laughs whenever your name comes up, but does not explain why."

"Well, it's good to see that she's retained her sense of humor. So what are two French witches saying about me?" I ask, answering her look with my own mock innocence.

"It is what you call, 'the girl talk.' I am afraid you would not understand, much like you will not understand how I am about to beat you."

It's good to see Fleur's competitive streak is still intact. "If that's what you tell yourself, Fleur. Cling to that knowledge and follow in my wake. I'd offer another wager, but every time we try this something goes wrong. So, I'll just settle for beating you fair and square."

"Perhaps that is not the only thing you will be settling for, Harry Potter?" She says. I also notice that she's not getting undressed.

It makes me wonder what her strategy is, while pouting that I won't be seeing her in a bikini. From the corner of my eye Manos seems to fill hers out nicely. The ladies in the crowd cheer when Krum vanishes his robes and Cedric takes his off and hands them to that Summerby bloke. I stay in my robes and curse my fourteen year old body.

Bagman signals and we step to our marks. The cheering builds. He raises his wand into the air and my own anticipation builds. As the burst of fireworks departs his wand, I slap my wand on the platform and start changing it to suit my needs. Krum dives into the water and begins a transformation into a shark. I wonder if he's an Animagus, if he's going for a partial transfiguration, or he's risking losing himself in a foreign mind.

Athena gives herself a mermaid tail and looks every bit like what a Muggle might think one would look like. Cedric has already changed a pair of rocks into some large fish, either pikes or gar, and is going to use a compulsion charm to make them pull him.

"Watch out for the shark infested water, mate?" I holler to him as I finish changing my platform into a windsailing rig like I've seen on the telly. A sticking charm keeps me from falling, as I use a wandless banisher to shove off. My wand conjures a strong wind and I start heading across the surface. Looking back, I see Fleur has summoned a broom and is coating it with what must be a bubble head charm.

Damn, I should have thought of that! I put more energy into my wind as Delacour mounts her broom and gives chase. I'm skipping along at a good clip and quickly approaching where I need to dive down and get my bag, but Fleur blows right by me and goes momentarily vertical before going into the water. I'm about thirty seconds behind.

I slap on a bubblehead and release the sticking charm. Hopping in the water, I turn my shoes to lead and start sinking rapidly. A smiling French witch passes me on her way back up. Unless they encounter resistance, or get lost, the others will be here shortly.

Safety monitors using Gillyweed float amongst the Merfolk, who watch with amused interest. It's tough to say what they think of all this – more stupid human games probably. I'm a bit off with my dive, but my cutter slices through the rope tethering the bag and I reverse the enchantment on my trainers. One quick summoning spell and I'm back on my way to the surface. My other three competitors can be seen making their way just over the giant rows of seaweed, but my thoughts are only on how far behind Fleur I am. Hopefully, she stinks at brewing potions.

I climb back onto my windsailing board and start for the point on the shoreline. A twinge of competitive anger urges me on. Being outsmarted is not a feeling that I particularly enjoy.

Fleur already has a cauldron boiling on a small fire pit when I run aground and splash the last few feet onto dry land. I sprint over to the area in front of the sleeping Hermione Granger and make several quick swish and flick maneuvers. A rock becomes a cutting knife. Firewood arranges itself in an orderly fashion and the summoned cauldron lands on top.

"Nice move with the broom, Fleur." I say while slicing off the rope and opening the pouch.

"I'm busy right now, Harry."

Pulling out the instructions I start filling the cauldron with the first ingredient, which happens to be lake water, and start a fire. An evil, little smile crosses my face, "Oh come on, Fleur. That was absolutely brilliant how you used the bubblehead charm to cover your broom as well. You probably didn't even get wet did you?"

She shoots me a glare for interrupting her, again. "You would do well to concentrate on the task at hand."

"Why Miss Delacour, how about some witty banter to entertain the crowd above us? C'mon live a little."

Her answer is a frustrated grunt and she casts a cone of silence over herself. Let's call that mission "partly" accomplished. I slice and dice the herbs in front of me and start shoveling them in the prescribed order into the boiling pot. A quick glance tells me that she's on the seventh step out of nine. I've got nothing to do but stir and wait. I use the time to cast a drying charm and scan the area to pick what path I'll take.

A tired looking Athena emerges from the water. She's probably regretting that fast swim right now. She shakes her arms and gets to work. Krum is right behind her. He crouches and vomits at the shoreline. Even partial animal transfigurations have a tendency to give a person a pounding headache. It sucks to be him. No wait. There's a bloody mass on left on the ground.

"What's Krum been up to," I ask Athena.

"He ate one of Diggory's Transfigured fish and probably wanted to get rid of it before it turned back into rock." She's as far behind me as I am behind Fleur.

The cheater will probably blame "animal instinct." He was probably hoping to interfere with either Fleur or me, but had to settle for Cedric.

Fleur deftly scoops up a bowl full and scrambles over to her sleeping hostage. She presses it to the male's lips. She scoops a second bowl and, unfortunately for me, I see movement. Fleur looks visibly relieved.

I keep stirring and look at Krum. He dumps his bag out on the ground and vanishes the contents. Pointing his wand at his hostage, he changes the student into a sleeping cat and drops it into the now empty bag. With a haughty look of superiority, he starts off down one of the trails.

Delacour and her awakened hostage pick the second trail as I weigh my options. Athena abandons her efforts and emulates Krum's strategy. Hell, I think about it, but since I'm almost done with the potion anyway, I'll finish it.

Besides, do they really think some non-lethal wards and tangle vines can slow me down?

Cedric comes out of the water as I tilt Hermione's head open and pour a dose down her gullet. She gag's a bit and spits all over me. She gets the second dose down and starts to come to.

"Where's that git, Krum?" Cedric asks.

"He didn't even bother with the potion, just took his sleeping hostage and left. If you're making the brew, I'd use Athena's spot and save some time. Her water's already boiling."

"Good call, but I'll take my chance with Cho sleeping." He casts a mobilicorpus spell and floats her off. I shake my head and know that he won't catch up at that speed.

I pull a groggy Hermione Granger to her feet and look at the dozen remaining broom riders – so much for my loyal fans. Too bad – everyone else is about to miss my epic come from behind victory.

"Harry, we're in last place."

"Well spotted."

"We need to get going!"

I give her an "I know what I'm doing" look and point my wand at a shrub. It turns into a large saddle.

"Harry, you're not going to turn me into something are you?" She sounds slightly panicked.

I walk over to a heavy boulder and smirk at her. "Tempting. Imagine tomorrow's headline – Potter mounts Granger and rides her to victory! But I think this will do nicely."

Focusing, I draw the shape in my mind. Originally, I wanted to conjure an elephant to do a riff on Hannibal crossing the Alps, but the path left to me runs along the shoreline. An elephant would be too slow and too big. A horse, even a Clydesdale, would be too vulnerable. I need something heavy enough to plow right on through the traps, and I'm loving the "Africa" theme. The boulder trembles and begins to take shape.

Hermione gasps as I start layering compulsion charms on the nearly two ton monstrosity, "Harry, that's a rhinoceros."

"Again, well spotted. Can't slip much by you, can I? Be a sport and grab the saddle. We'll be leaving shortly and it's going to be a bumpy ride. You'll need to concentrate and focus. We're probably going to hit some wards along the way and I don't know about you, but I don't plan on stopping. So no matter what, just keep those arms wrapped around me."

She struggles with the leather and tosses it on back. A flick of my wand secures it.

"You really want me to ride that thing?" She asks incredulously

I reply by thumping the side of the rhino and proclaiming, "This African rhino is Harry Potter's living, breathing, ward ignoring, trap breaking tank. Just like good old Monty himself, we're going to ride to victory over these heavily accented foreigners. Are you with me soldier?"

"Aye, Aye, sir." She gives me a mock salute and we climb up into the saddle.

Yes, I've flown faster on a broom. I was going quicker on a transfigured windsailing rig just a few minutes ago. Hell, I could even

hop off and run circles around it in my Pronghorn form. Still, there is something to be said about the thundering power of riding a charging rhinoceros.

Our path is along the shoreline. We power by a group of Merfolk, waist deep in the water and hurling nets at us. They're not prepared for our speed and we sweep past them. Only one net gets close and my banisher prevents it from being a threat.

Almost immediately, a feeling of dread starts to build. Hermione's arms tighten around me and "Mini-Tantor" starts to falter.

I hiss, "Focus Hermione, it's just a terror ward. There is no threat."

The rhino's animal instincts fight against my mental control, which also happens to be fighting the repulsion ward. It's difficult, but a drop in the bucket compared to a group of Dementors. I win, handily in fact. All it costs us is a bit of forward momentum. These trails are roughly five miles long. Krum and the others had at most a five minute lead on me. A glance to the sky shows that more broom riders are moving over our position.

That's as good an indication as any that we're catching up quickly.

"Harry, look! Tangle vines!"

"On Tantor!" I scream and do my best Lord of the Apes impression complete with the yell.

The sinewy vegetable matter lashes out trying to slow the rhino down. If it were a ten or fifteen stone human, they might be a formidable foe. To a creature weighing well over a hundred stone, they don't even register as a nuisance. The vines make a pleasant snapping sound seconds after wrapping around the powerful legs.

The crowd following us above continues to grow. We round a corner and head into the forest and away from the shore. A pair of red-caps scream and leap out of the way. Apparently, they don't know the answer to the old joke about how you stop a rhino from charging.

Floating in the middle of the path and approaching fast is a boggart. This ought to be interesting. I kick Tantor into a charge. The boggart begins to twist and take shape as we close with it. The face sends chills down my spine. My fear isn't a Dementor anymore. It's the only one I've ever really feared.

"You can't stop me, Potter. Your luck won't last." The screams of Lord Voldemort rock me to my core as we run him down.

His less than human hands flail at the sides of the rhino, trying to hold on. As it gets closer to Hermione, I hear it say, "He doesn't need you anymore. Even if he did, you will fail him when he needs you the most!"

Using my free hand, I punch it in the face and it slides off, getting a taste of the rhino's back leg. We charge onward in a nervous moment of silence.

Hermione clears her throat breaking the tension. "So, what happened to your fear of Dementors?"

"I've gotten the better of them too many times for them to be a threat."

"...and that was Voldemort?"

"Yup."

"How's it feel to trample your worst fear into the ground?"

"Actually, pretty good. I enjoyed it."

"I'll definitely have to tell my dad about this. He loves psychology. We'll call this aggression therapy. All we need are boggarts and lots of rhinos."

"I like that idea. And another thing, Granger..."

"Yes, Potter."

"Don't worry so much. I'll take all the help you can provide and be happy for it. I can't imagine not being friends with you."

I get one of her "ribcrushers" and we keep right on moving.

A few hundred feet and an easily beaten confusion ward later, I'm starting to think that this is going to be a cakewalk. The two poles planted in the ground covered with runes and carvings are enough to give me pause. It's definitely not something you'd expect to see in Scotland.

I pace Tantor carefully, "What do you make of those, Hermione?"

"I'm guessing some kind of Gargoyles imported from America. They're called Totem Poles. One looks like a bear and the other an Eagle."

"When in doubt, blow them up?" I offer an old Marauder standby.

She replies, "Certainly not a very elegant solution, but I elegance and rhinoceros don't really mix anyway. Have at it."

A blasting curse leaves my wand, but a large rock rolls into the pathway and absorbs a chunk of my curse. I try again, but a second boulder joins the first. If this doesn't stop soon, I'll have to break through a stone wall. A pair of shrieking shrubs add to the problem and I spend a minute burning them to cinders.

"It seems like they want us to come closer." My traveling companion adds.

At fifteen feet they start to glow. Swirling mist coalesces around us. I try to blow it away with conjured wind, but it is too thick. The mist solidifies into a bear paw and swipes at me. I slice through it with a cutter. The mist splits in two, but reforms on the other side of me. Hermione falls off flailing to defend herself against the Eagles talons and wisely rolls away from the vicinity around the suddenly skittish rhino.

I barely duck under the next paw swipe and leap off the rhino. That was close, too damn close. Fear starts to build inside me as I search for the answer to this trap.

Then it hits me. Actually, it doesn't hit my rhino and that's what hits me. The paw passes right through the rhino without injuring it. On an impulse, I leap into the path of the next swipe, which tries to dodge me making it appear that I had narrowly avoided it.

"Bloody Hell! Stop thrashing Hermione. They're illusions."

She stops and lets the talons attempt to terrorize her. The smoke takes a few more mock attacks at us and the fog starts to clear. However, there is an uprooting sound and I see the poles pull themselves out of the ground, sprout limbs and begin advancing on us.

"Harry, go back to the first plan. Blow them up!" Granger's voice raises an octave or two.

The eagle totem pole gets rammed by Tantor and I unleash a healthy dose of Potter fury on the bear totem. Blasters rip chunks of it away. It takes four to bring it down. I turn to the eagle, which has gotten by Tantor, and throw an overpowered tripping jinx its way. The eagle stumbles, and tries to grab Hermione, but my freshly conjured firewhip slices it in half.

"That definitely wasn't an illusion." I release the firewhip into the ether and look at the path. A groan escapes my lips as more boulders roll together, fuse, and form a solid wall. Four blasters and a firewhip in such a short span leave me a bit worse for wear. This is of course on top of, maintaining the rhinoceros, the saddle, and the compulsion charms on our steed. I don't relish the idea of tackling a thick wall.

"Should we try and blast through?" I ask hoping that Hermione has a better plan.

"Spray water at the base of the wall. The weight will cause it to shift forward and the wall will fall forward. We could even tie ropes around

Tantor and attach them to the top corners with a sticking charm to help it along. After all, you did make this big strong animal. Let's put it to work."

My hopes are answered. "They do keep calling you the brightest witch in our generation. I guess there must be something to that."

"Well yes, and every now and again, I have to give people a reason to keep saying that. It's getting rather tiresome. Would you like to switch for awhile? I'll be the Girl-Who-Lived."

I laugh. "How long have you been waiting to use that one?"

"Since early in the term – I just hadn't found the right moment."

Further down the trail, I spot the glint of something dangerous at our speed.

"Tantor halt!" We skid abruptly to a stop twenty or so feet in front of it. My rhino is gasping for breath. It's about time to trade it in for a new rhino with a fresh set of legs.

"It's beautiful," Hermione says.

I am forced to agree. It's a dense and intricate mass of webbing the likes of which I've never scene. It runs for over a dozen feet and is anchored to damn near everything. Acromantula webbing is thick, fire resistant, and tough to cut through. I'm glad I didn't try to blast through that wall.

"Off we go!" I climb down on unsteady legs after a couple of miles of rhino riding. I help Hermione down and hand her my wand. "We can appreciate it later in our memories. I don't see any of the creatures that made it, so I reckon we just have to cut our way through. Get as far as you can with my wand and I'll send the rhino through the hole you make at full speed. Then we reverse the transfiguration and use blasting curses on the rock. The shrapnel should rip the rest of the way through it. Does that sound good to you?"

She nods. My phoenix feather wand is a poor match for Hermione, but she makes up for it with a vigorous assault on the web, while I rest and keep control over the rhino. I feel better already about my decision to stay and wake my friend. This isn't going to be easy and only Fleur has someone else to share the load."

Granger banishes chunks of wood into it at high velocities and sets them on fire. Sure the webbing doesn't burn all that well, but adding the stout logs provide both weight and fuel at the same time.

She tosses the wand to me to catch her breath as I animate a couple of the trees the webs are anchored to. I collapse them onto the mass. Soon, there is a roaring bonfire going and the webs are burning and breaking.

Five minutes pass and Hermione declares, "Harry, we've made a jolly good mess of things. I don't think can send the rhino through it, but we can get through with some good old fashioned fireproofing charms.

Just like that witch who enjoyed being burned at the stake, we coat ourselves and climb across the burning trees. At the midway point I animate one of the branches from a particularly large tree and have it hurl me over the remaining wall of web. I cast a quick Cushioning charm and let the now spongy ground absorb my fall.

"Your turn, Hermione."

"Harry, wait just a ..."

The tree limb catapults her. She stumbles and bounces in a rather undignified manner and steadies herself on me.

"I'm sorry were you trying to say something?"

She cuffs me on the head. "Prat! C'mon ape boy. Let's get Tantor mark two."

"Me Tarzan. You Jane?"

"Not even. How about that tree? The saddle's thick enough to protect us from splinters, if you want to conserve some energy with this Transfiguration and living matter to living matter makes for less energy expenditure," she offers with a grin, "Of course, you'll need to save some strength for tomorrow when you start teaching me large object to large animal Transfigurations."

"It's in my anybook, Hermione. Maybe you're not applying yourself. Ow!"

I probably deserved that punch in the shoulder she gives me.

Our next rhino, "Treeter," is a bit rough around the edges and not quite as fast as my earlier effort, but still much faster than us on two legs. He gets us through another ward and a wall consisting of charmed hay bales that kept reforming and blocking our progress. Finally we lose him to a pit with an illusionary cover that we missed.

I snap off a really fast Cushioning charm, but discover that it is unnecessary. We start floating upside down in some kind of null gravity magic.

"The Upside-down Rhino" – it sounds like one of Padfoot's absurd euphemisms for sex.

"What do you think we should try first?" Hermione asks.

"If we nullify it, the rhino falls on us. That would be bad. I'm thinking we get rid of it first. Shove off, so we can float away from it."

She does and I reverse the Transfiguration. A portion of the tree now sticks out of the pit and after spending a few minutes figuring out how to maneuver, we finally climb along the tree and exit. Hermione crosses the ward line first and falls on her rump. This obviously slows me down because I have to stop and laugh at her.

"Are you okay?"

Hermione sums it up nicely. "Miles of riding on a rhinoceros and now this – I think I broke my bum."

"And here I thought all along that pain in your arse was named Ron. We're at the four mile mark. I think I'm too knackered to make another rhino."

She chuckles, "Oh good, you're still human then. I was beginning to wonder."

"Stuff it. We've only got a mile to go. Can you ride a horse?"

"Yes, but transfiguring a horse shouldn't be much different from a rhinoceros."

"I'll be the horse, if you can reverse it. Self-Transfiguration is less power intensive and my Occlumency will keep me from going animal stupid. Besides, I'm guessing you grew up on Black Beauty and National Velvet."

"Sure," she says with a growl, "here you had me fooled that you were at the end of your rope. Don't worry; I'll just turn myself into a bloody horse, Hermione – there's really nothing too it."

I ignore her exhausted sarcasm. "No, I'm just too tired to make a rhino – slight difference. Can you reverse it?"

She nods and proves it by showing me the motions. With that settled, I cast the spell and feel myself changing. It's taller than my Animagus form and there's the distinctive foggy feeling that always accompanies a full animal Transfiguration. I shake my head slightly and trot for a second to get the feel of this form.

Hermione scoops up my wand and pats me on my elongated and flaring nostrils. "You know something? 'Granger mounts a champion and rides Potter bareback to victory' does sound like a smashing headline."

I snort at the cheeky witch and whiney for her to get on. As payback, I'll tell her she needs to lay off the desserts when she changes me back. Sadly, I know that even Occlumency can't save me from that

killer headache I'll have later tonight. Too bad I can't just go Pronghorn and do this without the pain.

We start off at a slow trot, wary for any last traps that might be there, and cover the remaining distance to the edge of the forest. Not surprisingly, there are no other champions in sight and I break into a full gallop and ride to victory.

This is what should have been happening all along. It's a travesty that any of them are even close, much less ahead of me in this competition.

Author's Notes – Visit my profile for the latest word on all my original stories. Join me on Darklordpotter to discuss this story. I certainly hope this was much more interesting than the usual water task. With the way things have been going wrong in this tournament, would you have volunteered to be someone's hostage floating down there in the water? I should also mention that the use (or is it overuse) of the rhinoceros in this chapter is a shout out to Meteroic Shipyards for taking the road not often travelled of rhinoanimagus Harry.

Disclaimer – Just another fanfic.

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Chapter 20 – The Geist and the Grotto

Harry Potter Overpowers the Competition, Boldly Predicts Victory in Triwizard Tournament.

by Rita Skeeter

Harry Potter certainly put his naysayers in their place yesterday at the Triwizard Tournament. Riding a massive transfigured rhinoceros, he shattered the obstacle course and left four frustrated competitors in his wake and a massive crowd staring in awe.

The young and exceptionally talented prodigy started well, choosing to speed across the surface of the water in a magical recreation of an odd Muggle device. His strategy put him in the lead, but only for a moment; Fleur Delacour, with a brave face in the light of the injury to her best friend, set forth to prove that she is no pushover and used an exceptionally-cast Bubblehead charm to protect her summoned broom from the elements and zoomed into the lead, becoming the first to reach the Merfolk village and recover the potion ingredients.

Should we expect anything less than blinding speed from a champion broom racer?

The other three contestants employed various magics to aid them in travelling underwater. Both Durmstrang students employed partial animal transfigurations and Hufflepuff's own Cedric Diggory employed fish to pull him along conserving his strength for the final leg of the challenge, which helped him place fourth.

Athena Manos spoke about the flaw in her initial strategy, which ultimately led to her third place finish: "I was exhausted from the long swim. My arms were very sore by the time I exited the lake. It was a

poor choice on my part. I would have been better to emulate any of the other strategies employed."

Viktor Krum had no comments for the press and he rapidly departed the press tent in a state of profound anger despite the request that all the champions appear in a group photograph for the sponsors of the event. His dreadful fifth place showing left him third overall in the chase for eternal glory. Catching Harry Potter may prove to be more than the temperamental Bulgarian Bon Bon can handle. His tantrum injured a fellow schoolmate, transfigured and sleeping in a cat form. Krum callously tossed the bag upon exiting the forest a full five minutes behind our other Hogwarts competitor.

His bad boy behavior rekindled those rumors that he's been dabbling in the performance enhancement potions again. Perhaps the judges should consider another round of testing. If true, Krum certainly wouldn't be the first Quidditch star to "come out of the cauldron" as it were.

Asked about Krum's strategy, the Boy Who Lived replied with a dazzling smile, "It was a risk. Those kinds of gambles either win big or fail spectacularly. Fortunately, for me, it didn't pay off."

Harry went on to clarify that he did not think that Viktor Krum was a spectacular failure, showing a great deal of sportsmanship and poise for one so young.

When asked about his prospects of becoming only the second youngest Triwizard Champion in recorded history, his eyes beamed with a self-assured pride and he said, "I think I can pull it off. I need to perform well in the next events, but I'm going to do my level best to widen my lead in the remaining tasks."

At the second stage, the champions had the option of brewing a potion to wake their hostage or simply take the hostage and continue on the course. Only Delacour and our dear Harry even attempted the potion. What is ironic is that these two were rated as the worst at the art of brewing. Sources in the Beauxbatons camp indicated that the dazzling witch's strengths are in Charms and not Potions. As for

Harry, Hogwarts embattled Potions Professor, Severus Snape, evaluated Potter's abilities as "marginal on his best day."

Of course, his assessment might have less to do with Harry's fantastic performance during the tournament than it does with the brutally honest letter sent by young Harry to the Hogwarts Board of Governors concerning Severus Snape's own performance. Requests to see said letter have been declined, but a few of the governors were willing to comment off the record and they implied that the letter was a scathing review of the man's teaching abilities. What is known is that Harry was able to remove himself from the tyrannical kettle stirrer's class and intern in the Hogwarts infirmary under Madame Poppy Pomfrey, where his heroics during Aimee Beaucourt's horrific injuries have been already covered.

It does lead many of the readers of my column to question what kind of institution Albus Dumbledore is running.

Back to the drama of the tournament: Potter was suddenly in last place, with the other champions minutes ahead, but executed flawlessly a tortoise-over-hare recovery! After waking his very close friend Hermione Granger, he proceeded to transfigure a small rock into a thundering rhinoceros. To put this in perspective, readers are asked to consider their own fourth year in school and determine whether they were capable of performing this feat. Madame Marchbanks was asked her opinion and she said, "It was well above any NEWT requirement." She went on to say that his Transfiguration skills may very well rival that of a young Albus Dumbledore.

Even more impressive is that he did it a second time using a shrub. Some would say that the rumors that Minerva McGonagall might very well be leaving are a bad sign, but is Harry's blossoming skill the result of her antiquated teaching methods, or the result of a prodigy and his diligent studies.

Harry's gift for Transfiguration has been a boon to McGonagall's career, to say the least. Latest word is that she has accepted an offer to speak at the Oslo Transfiguration Association in June and that there may even be a book deal in the works. One would hope that she has the decency to thank those who made this possible.

Suffice to say that old Albus may need to break out the catnip if he intends to keep his favorite Animagus on staff! Sources say that the goblin bookies are giving two to one odds that she'll be in warmer climates at the start of the next school term.

When asked, the Scottish witch was tight-lipped about where she might be after the summer break, but had this to say about young Harry, "He's an extraordinary student – the rare prodigy that comes along every few generations. I wish I could take credit for his performance in this contest, but he has surpassed even my expectations."

Already short a Defense instructor and on the verge of losing his Potions professor, the Headmaster can ill afford another staffing catastrophe. It is most ironic that much of Dumbledore's woes can be linked back, in one way or another, to Harry Potter.

Harry's performance yesterday was one for the ages. From the moment his wand flared with power and a skill that both baffled and dazzled the rest of us humble practitioners, it was over.

He was the 'unstoppable force' and let me tell you, there was no 'immovable object' to be found.

Trying to downplay his triumph that had him comfortably chatting with the Press for a full fifteen minutes before the Miss Delacour and her hostage staggered out of the forest, he said this.

"Rita, a lot of credit goes to my friend, Hermione. She came up with some absolutely brilliant ways to get through the obstacles."

He might have been trying to be gracious and eat a slice of humble pie for the sake of his friend, who is rumored to be quite cozy with Head Boy Roger Davies. Naturally, this begs the question about the Granger-Potter-Davies love triangle, but even the Muggleborn witch would have to admit that Harry Potter was in a realm of his own yesterday and she was lucky to be along for the ride.

A ride I might add that ended with him performing a complete Animal Transfiguration into a well-defined black charger with the fiercest green eyes I've ever seen.

His closest pursuer, Delacour, was positively stunned to learn that she had not won the event. Her valiant effort could only produce a second place finish. After recovering her composure, she said, "Harry Potter is a true competitor. Any victory over him is a victory that has been earned."

If that's the case, she and the others had better get back to work. That much is evident.

"Not letting that go to your feeble brain, HJ?"

"No, Hat, I can enjoy my victory without Rita's exaggerations. She does have a way with the words though. I'm kind of annoyed that she barely mentioned Cedric."

"There's that fucking useless sense of fair play surfacing again, Potter. If I could vomit, I would. You should be glad that aging slit actually likes you—look what she does to those she doesn't care for. She almost reminds me of a much younger and much less worldly version of myself. Maybe in few decades, she'll be a suitable companion."

I mentally cringe at the prospect of a team-up between the amoral reporter and the even less moral Sorting Hat. Anyone with half a mind would be frightened.

It flexes the Golem's fingers. "I never thought I'd enjoy grabbing something so much. I was always resented all those greasy, slimy paws of those eleven year olds, some not even with enough common sense to wipe the boogers off their fingers before grabbing me. Still, I like holding something. It gives me power. Conjure an animal, HJ."

"I'm a tad busy at the moment." I glance at the soapstone carving of a fly on the workbench in front of me. I'm trying to improve on my

information-gathering network and add a touch of permanency to them."

"Don't tell me that your fly has come undone!" It cackles with glee.

"Ah, very funny. I'm surprised you haven't made a Lord of the Flies crack yet."

"I was going to wait until you actually had one that worked first. It seems I'll be waiting awhile."

"You're on a roll. It makes me wonder how many Hats Godric went through before he settled on you."

"Bah! I was his greatest creation."

"I might be biased, but the sword might have you beat."

"The sword! The sword! Anyone can take a hunk of metal, slap some fancy gems on it and cast a few enchantments. It was better thought lost to the ages."

Methinks I've found a sore spot – a chink in the Hat's armor. I file that away. After all, everyone and everything has a weakness. I struggle for a moment before recalling what the Hat wanted.

"What kind of creature do you want?"

"A feline."

"And what do you want to do with it?"

"Strangle it and watch it die."

I give it an incredulous glare before it says, "I wish to pet it, you feeble-minded buffoon. I'm still trying to get used to this golem's strength, so I might end up crushing its ruddy skull. I figured I should practice before I try the real thing. Granger's little pussy keeps rubbing up against me and you know something..."

Cutting it off, I say, "Here you go. No further explanation required!" Wherever it was going, I chose not to follow. I've never conjured an animal so fast in my life.

The first cat lasts about two minutes before I hear a horrible death squeal. I conjure another.

"Seems I need more practice," it says, off the ...cuff.

"Not hard to believe. Most humans require years to develop fine motor skills."

"Bah, you're flawed creatures. What I can't believe is that you're going through with this idiotic bet to serve dinner on that ship."

I point back to the fly on the table. "I wouldn't, except that I want to release the first fly as close to Karkaroff's cabin as possible, so it can learn the route. I'm sure he's rattled enough to check for eavesdropping charms, but this will be a simple recording charm. Who checks for those? Hell, I had to look up a charm that can do it and I'm pretty damn sneaky."

"Helga was adept at those. Godric's cheating ways made her a quick study." Another gurgled squeal signifies another dead cat. This isn't helping my concentration.

"You ever thought about a writing a book about them? I can charm a quill, or you could learn how to write. It might be better practice than accumulating a pile of dead animals next to you. Just think – you could make your own money."

"Or I could strike a deal with Skeeter and let her do all the writing and collect a percentage. The stories I could tell. You might be on to something, HJ."

Me and my big mouth. I truly hope the ghosts of the four founders are nowhere to be found.

"So tell me, HJ – when was the last time you checked for a listening charm?"

I think it over and humor the artifact. Much to my shock, there's a glow over by the far wall. I race over to it and find a barely visible string dangling against the wall, like a thick cobweb.

Two sets of eyes peer up at me blearily.

"Gah! What's that smell?" the first one says.

"What's the game, Potter?" the second one gropes for a wand that isn't there.

"No games, Weasleys."

"Where are we? Is that..."

"Yes, it's the Basilisk. This is where I saved the life of your sister. This is where we finish our little tit-for-tat game."

"What are you talking about? We haven't done anything." They say it together, like some kind of conditioned response.

I toss their "Extendable Ear" to them. They look understandably confused. I clear it up for them. "I obliterated you. The last week of your memories are missing."

Both of the ginger dicks look angry. "You've crossed the line, Potter. We'll see your arse in Azkaban for this... Chosen One or not!"

I shake my head and hand them the paperwork. "Read. Binding papers signed in blood. I purchased the last seven days of your memories for five hundred Galleons each."

Their eyes goggle at the sum.

The first one looks at me and finally forms a coherent thought, "Why?"

"Why you were spying on me, or why did I buy you off? Why you were spying on me is that you're a pair of right foul gits who don't take no for an answer. Apparently, your brother Bill doesn't trust me either. He helped you work out the kinks in this little spying toy of yours and you two made a hole into my workshop and have been listening in for the past week. The two of you got in over your heads and found out something you had no business knowing, something my parents died for."

The two idiots stare for a second and I can already see the greedy wheels spinning in their head. Helga's bloody head on a pike! Was I ever that damn transparent?

"Grow up, you fucking morons! The only reason I paid is because I didn't want your deaths on my head. Turn around and take a goddamn look. I have no qualms about killing things that threaten me. What you found out threatened me and the only reason I made a deal is because I didn't want to have to look your mum and dad in the eyes and pretend that I don't know what ever happened to Fred and George."

I let that sink in before continuing. "This is a one-time deal, boys. You've got your hush money and it's all you're ever going to get from me. This is the first, last, and only withdrawal from the bank of Potter. Don't go digging where you're not wanted – it won't end well. Those papers you signed say that if you rediscover the secret in the next two years, you have to tell me or Dumbledore first or else forfeit the money. If you can't pay back all the money, it's three months of indentured servitude and I will work your arses so fucking hard, you will be begging Parkinson to tell you how she gets rid of the welts.

I stop. Hat must be rubbing off on me. My little tirade has them both speechless for a brief moment.

One summons a bit of that Gryffindor courage. "Fair enough, Potter. We'll steer clear of you."

"Bit high strung, don't you think, Fred?"

"Fred, I thought you were Fred. Potter, how much exactly did you Obliviate?"

I ignore the feeble attempt at levity. Imbeciles! And I know that Dumbledore already has his eyes on them for the Order. I doubt he'll approve of my heavy-handedness, but there are rough patches in every partnership. The way I see it, I'm keeping his hands clean and taking this one for the cause. He would have had to do the same thing, although I doubt he'd have threatened their lives.

Then again, he did task me with keeping an eye on the students.

"Come on. We're finished here. I'm late for an interview with a reporter from the Quibbler and this place stinks of death."

My interview turns out to be with Ginny's classmate – that little blonde third year. It turns out she's the publisher's daughter and he gave her press credentials.

Wonders never cease.

Luna presents me with a tiny rhinoceros crafted out of Butterbeer corks. "One of our readers made this because of your support of MILF."

I'm not quite sure where this is going. "What exactly is MILF?"

She tosses her hair and I note the small radishes she's using for earrings. "The Merfolk Intercontinental Liberation Front – I'm surprised that you haven't heard of us."

"I'm sorry, I don't quite understand." She looks perfectly serious, but even among Ravenclaws, she's a strange bird.

"They wanted to recognize the way in which you completed the aquatic portion of the task and did not interact with a single Merperson. By keeping a respectful distance, you have done wonders to advance the cause of MILF."

"Are there a lot of MILFs?" I ask, half wondering if Sirius is somehow involved in this.

She smiles. "Our numbers grow daily."

Okay, I'll play. "Forgive me, I've been a little busy with this competition and I'm unfamiliar with the stated goals of ... MILF."

"Well, obviously you know that the Merfolk are a key ally in the struggle with the Rotfang Conspiracy. So, MILF seeks to curry favor with them by giving them exactly what they want."

First the twins, now this. "What exactly do they want?"

"Non-interaction with humans and the freedom to roam the waterways of the world."

"So, by not interacting with them, you're actually negotiating with them."

"Correct. You are a quick study. Every day we don't speak to them is another step towards unity. Tell me, would you ever consider becoming a spokeswizard for MILF? We would want you to say as little about the Merpeople as possible. Our current spokeswitch has been slipping as of late. Are you okay? You look like you've been beset by Nargles."

It's all I can do not to laugh. "I'll think it over. Do you have some other questions?"

Sadly, she does. They make even less sense than the previous one. Things brighten up when she tells me the name title of her article.

Harry Potter Considering MILF's Offer

I order ten copies.

The next day, I am summoned to Dumbledore's office for tea. He makes a point of publicly inviting Cedric for a visit tomorrow. Their conversation is likely to be more pleasant—or at least less heated.

"I did what I thought was necessary."

"You're not a fully trained Obliviator, Harry. Despite your immense talents, you could have caused irreparable harm to them. You should have brought them to me. A misstep and you could have doomed either of them to spend a lifetime like Mr. Lockhart."

"Any word from St. Mungo's?" I hope to change the topic.

He shakes his head. "I check every day and remain hopeful. Back to the matter at hand..."

"We both know I'm not a schoolchild, Albus. I made the call. They needed to be warned away and not in a gentle grandfatherly manner. I know their type. That wouldn't have worked. In any other Order matter, I'll toe the line, except when it comes to me and anything concerning the Prophecy. I've got to draw the line there."

"So be it, Harry. I accept your rationale, but certainly not your method. You could have summoned me and I would have Obliviated them. Your ruse that you had performed it would have been safe. Remember the lesson of Julius Caesar. As important as winning the day is building loyal allies. I will never second-guess your dealings with our enemies, but I will ask you to show restraint when it comes to others."

"What about Bill Weasley? I'm assuming the twins communicated to him and he went to you."

"I have already spoken to him and I voiced my support for your actions even though I disagreed with them. His anger has been assuaged and let us leave it at that. Perhaps the next time you find yourself in France, I will arrange for William to be there and the two of you may settle your differences in any manner that leaves both of you alive."

"I could use the extra variety. It's fine by me." Bill also needs a sound thrashing. It's a win-win situation as far as I am concerned.

"Please try not to sound too eager, Harry."

"If I was eager, I'd say send Charlie as well before he decides to start meddling."

Albus smiles slightly and reaches into the drawer. He retrieves a treat for "old" Fawkes who does a slow waddle across the desk to retrieve it. "I have heard that you intend to venture once again onto Igor's ship Friday night on the eve of your next task. You do know that both Olympe and I are headed to the ICW meeting. Igor himself has announced that he has somewhere else that he must be and will conveniently be indisposed. This has all the makings of a trap and I have no intention of allowing Igor make moves unchecked. I intend to ask Minerva to be on the ship tomorrow. Young Athena and her bodyguards will also be there. Should there be anything more than juvenile antics afoot, I suspect that they will act on the behalf of someone who currently holds her family's favor."

"Yes, Krum called in his marker. He wants both Fleur and me to serve him and a group of guests together. After the skewering the press gave him, I'd be more concerned if he wasn't going to try something patently humiliating the night before our next challenge."

Dumbledore steeples his hands and says, "Ah yes, speaking of the next challenge... I believe Pomona is already explaining it to young Cedric and it's a fair estimate that everyone else has been informed a long time ago. This Saturday's challenge will take place an hour before the Quidditch match between Hogwarts and Beauxbatons. Since the arena will be filled to capacity, we might as well give them a warm up. On the field, the Apparition Wards will be lifted, much like I make the Great Hall accessible for those who wish to learn the skill. There is another course you and your fellow competitors must travel. It is a series of discs that will be floating in the air. You must Apparate to each one. There you will find three targets floating at ten, twenty and thirty feet respectively. You will strike each one with a piercing curse aiming for the center. Each missed bull's eye is a time penalty that will be assessed to your overall time. The winner is the one who

has the best adjusted time. It is a trial of precision and speed. Think of it like throwing darts in a pub."

I mull it over – like I really have a choice. "It sounds straightforward enough."

"Let us hope so."

"I don't know where Mandy got the idea that I want to cheat on her. Girls!" my patient complains, before asking nervously, "Are you sure Madame Pomfrey isn't available?"

"Just hold still." I look over the back of Terry Boot's hand and start countercursing the boils and blisters there. This is a pesky one. Each time I try to counter it, it spawns twice as many and Terry shrieks in pain. My latest effort has spread it halfway to his elbow.

"Tricky one this is. So what exactly got Brocklehurst's knickers in a twist?" I run another diagnostic and try to jog my memory for what can fix this. I could just have him wait for Poppy to get back from the staff meeting, but I like challenges.

"Lisa's sister came into the common room last night and Mandy caught me checking out the Head Girl's bum. That started a row, which carried on into this morning and she decided to curse me. She wasn't aiming for my hand, mate. I'm lucky I got it down there in time. Crazy bint was trying to curse my willy off!"

"Might be best to cut her loose, Boot, or be a bit more discreet with that wandering eye,. Imagine if she knew more dangerous curses." I cut Terry some slack. Melinda Turpin has a great looking arse! Trust me – I know.

My patient shudders while I search for the counter. It's on the tip of my tongue. Oh right, that's it – the counter is the standard boil jinx. It's one of those deceptive spells. I begin casting and the multiple boils all start merging into the one big boil. Soon it is swollen into a large mass on the back of his hand.

"I've got to lance it now, Terry. This is going to be a bit messy."

A weak cutter opens it up into a filthy, bloody mess of puss. My classmate looks like he wants to hurl. I shove a flask of Blood Replenisher in his good hand and start closing the wound. I smear some antiseptic salve on it afterwards and give the whole thing a mild Numbing Charm.

"Still itches a little," he complains.

"That's the cream. It'll be fine in twenty minutes. If you want to pull a prank on Mandy, I can disillusion your hand and you can tell her we had to amputate."

He smiles evilly. It's probably an extra service that Poppy doesn't provide, but I am delighted to be of assistance. From my perspective, Mandy should be worried if her fifteen-year-old boyfriend wasn't looking at attractive women.

Terry leaves with his "missing" hand. He passes Neville on the way out.

"Hey Neville. Everything okay?" He hasn't been in the infirmary for weeks thanks to my help and Hermione also giving him some tutoring.

"Can we talk in private?"

I look over at the groaning second year with a stomach virus, who is trying to sleep, and I walk Neville to the back of the infirmary. "What's up?"

"This morning, Professor Dumbledore arranged for Madame Hooch to take me to St. Mungo's to see my parents."

"Really? What happened?" Good for Dumbledore. He's hoping Neville's presence might help with a breakthrough.

"It was my mum. She mumbled my name and squeezed my hand when we were getting ready to leave. She's never done that before."

"That's great."

"Yeah, we got the Healers in there and they seemed to think it was a good sign as well, so I used the floo to call Gran."

There is a sinking feeling in my gut. "What did she say?"

"Well, she started talking with the Healers and they wanted to bring in some specialists." He smacks the stone wall in disgust and continues, "She said it would be too expensive and didn't want to spend the money."

I try not to let my anger show. If I'd given the potion to Frank and her little boy had shown any kind of improvement, Augusta would be holding a rummage sale to raise the funds for any treatment. That damn crone in her stupid hats! I fight to control my anger. I knew she and Alice were never on the best of terms, but come on!

"The Headmaster came and started to arrange for her treatment, but she refused his offer."

"Then what happened?" I'm trying to rationalize Augusta's decision. She could have run the family fortune into the ground. She might be trying to protect Neville from getting his hopes up. The last possibility is that she simply doesn't give a shit about Alice.

"They got into a big row and Gran called him several things that I don't want to repeat. She even threatened to go after him through the Hogwarts Board of Governors."

I can see he is frustrated. "What can I do?"

"The only one who can authorize treatment is Gran or me, and you know she doesn't let me have any money."

"How much do you need?" In for a penny, in for a pound, so the saying goes.

"They say the specialists will cost about two thousand galleons. I can't pay you back until I'm seventeen, but can you loan me the money?"

I wince, knowing how hard my vault has been hit by bribing the twins. It'll stretch things in my trust vault mighty thin, but I can refill it by winning the tournament or getting Sirius or Dumbledore to float me a loan.

"Done. Just let me write something to the goblins and authorize the funds. You owl the hospital and get the specialists."

"It'll probably make Gran mad when she finds out," Neville cautions.

I clap him on the shoulders and say, "You stand your ground with her and don't back down. If she tells you to return the money, tell her that I won't accept it and send her to me. She doesn't want a piece of the Boy-Who-Lived right now. If she tries to raise a stink, I'll go to the papers. Trust me, the press loves me right now. That's one battle that she will lose--badly, in fact." Dumbledore would be seen as meddling, but Harry Potter will be seen as helping a friend. Augusta has no chance in hell of shutting this one down.

"Thank you, Harry. You don't know how much this means to me."

I scribble off a note to Gringotts, sign it with Poppy's official blood quill, and give it to him. He runs off to the Owlery to use Hedwig. For the moment, I'm happy. It's good news – not great news, but it's still something.

For Augusta's sake, I hope she is trying to protect Neville. If I ever find out that it's sheer pettiness, I won't be held responsible for my actions.

Alice quit the Aurors to become a mother and a housewife. It's true that Frank was the better fighter, but Alice was the best in her year at Potions, and no pushover with a wand either. If she comes out of it, she'll have the daunting task of facing off against her mother-in-law and trying to reverse engineer the Philosopher's Stone out of only a few drops of the Elixir. Snape or Slughorn might have a better chance

of doing it, but who in their right mind would trust either of those two with the secret to eternal life? I'd rather take a chance on someone who is motivated for more honorable reasons like saving her husband and perhaps her own life.

"You look very nice this evening, Fleur."

"The Irish colors suit you. They bring out your eyes."

I smooth Finnegan's jersey. "My other choice was a very expensive Muggle suit."

A subtle movement sends her hair over her shoulder. There is an understated sensuality conveyed. She can't help it. I act like I ignore it, but it's definitely sexy.

"That would have been a general insult to everyone on board. I am glad you exercised a measure of restraint; I have no desire to fight my way off of this primitive vessel. Do you know in Beauxbatons, we have a lake and our boats are carved to resemble swans and things of beauty? This ... this relic, is a sad reminder of nomadic tribes who are best forgotten."

Fleur must make a wonderful traveling companion. She and Hat should narrate travel documentaries together. They could go places and Fleur would insult the local culture and architecture. The Hat would just insult everything else. It would be a smashing success! "Well, tell me what you really think. Do me a big favor. Let me know if you're going to repeat that while we serve dinner. I want to see their faces and be properly positioned by the exit."

We stare at the gangway and she hides a smile.

"Are you nervous that he may try to do something?"

"I'll be nervous if he doesn't. You?"

She appears indifferent. "I'm only in second place. Whatever he has in store for you will take center stage. That and my father is an extremely powerful man with a long memory for those that cross his family. I'm guessing the pureblood Veela is here for me to serve."

"Well, if she's a social climber, she might abandon third place Krum for one of us." I don't add that if it's Fleur, I'd pay to watch.

They gesture for us to come aboard. Most every student is there to watch us come up the wooden gangway. I give them my best cheeky smile and say, "Which way to the ship's galley? I didn't get to see it last time."

Padfoot always says enter a room and set the tone. Usually, he's talking about chasing skirts, but it applies here as well. More than a few recognize the significance of my attire. It looks like they know a thing or two about mean-spirited gestures. Maybe I am at the wrong school after all. I sign the manifest as a visitor this time with a flourish. On the steps downward, I release my "spyfly" version two and hope all my work was worth it.

The galley is aft of the dining hall; we get to pass through it on our way in. I spot Viktor's opening move. There is a whole table of Veela on one side of the room and seated at Viktor's table is Draco Malfoy and the majority of my Slytherin fourth year classmates. Oddly, there is no Minerva McGonagall. I sense the hand of Snape here.

"Always said you make a good house elf, Potter."

"Oh, Viktor, consorting with a wizard who was caught trying to cheat. It doesn't say much for the company you keep."

"You are not here for conversation, Potter," Krum states. "You are here to serve."

Turning, I nudge the red faced Fleur, who is staring daggers at the five Veela making distasteful faces at her. "Enough skylarking. There's soup and salad to be served. Do you want the trolls at table three or the pathetic English dogs at table two? More importantly, do you think any of them are good tippers?"

Maybe there's a future in the food service industry when I take care of this little Dark Lord problem once and for all.

The Geist is waiting for me in the Galley. Gargoyle-like wings beat slowly and a psychic wind rattles the pans hanging on their hooks. The face fluctuates between a skull and something more demonic. It hisses and stares a hole through me while floating a dozen knives threateningly in the air. A gesture buries several in the wall to their hilts. I've got to admit, it has generations of practice at being intimidating.

"Look, Fleur, it does tricks! Do you have a name?" I ask idly. I don't have to admit my intimidation publicly.

"One day, human, I will find you. You will scream. You will beg for mercy, and I will remember your little jokes."

"Feel free to get in the queue. Get in line behind Krum and the lot out there. I'll be with you eventually." I stop to look at it. "Did you ever think what would happen to you if this boat were shall we say ... destroyed?"

The thing gets right in my face. The proximity makes my skin crawl and I see my reflection in the netherlight of its empty sockets.

"I'm a trifle busy at the moment, if you don't mind."

It growls and walks through the wall as I wrap an apron around my waist.

My co-worker frowns at me. "It is one thing to be fearless and I respect that, but fearless and stupid is a terrible combination."

"I prefer to think I'm recklessly heroic. It's part of my charm. Now let's go serve some shitty Eastern European food to some equally shitty people and get the hell off of this derelict piece of driftwood."

If they ever do that travel series, maybe I can join them every once in awhile.

So dinner goes; every time I walk out the door to the kitchen, the Slytherins are making snide remarks and trying to get to me. The Veela make condescending remarks about Fleur's heritage and try to ensnare me with their charms.

I've rarely ever been so horny and brassed off at the same time. It's an interesting state of mind.

I stop by Athena's table and nod to her. "How are you this evening?"

"Better than you, I suppose," the Greek witch answers. "Thank you for the entertainment this evening. It is nice to see Viktor trying his best and still not completely getting his way. I signed you in as my guest as well in the event he planned on turning you over to the Geist. I will not allow that to happen."

"Thank you. Care to tell me what happened to the Hogwarts teacher that was supposed to be here?"

"I believe someone may have told her that Viktor rescheduled this evening's festivities, or some other distraction was crafted courtesy of your friends over there. Lying to instructors is something of an art at our school."

Well that explains that. Minerva has always been a bit too trusting. "Good luck to you in the competition tomorrow."

"To you as well, Harry," she answers, as Malfoy spills his drink for the third time and begins calling for more.

I approach the table and feel my eyes narrow at the stupid grin he has on his face. "Draco, I assumed you had been given a background in etiquette. It turns out that you're just an inbred little mutt. It's probably the source of your many failings. Did you know that clumsiness is common in mongrels? It's like this Muggle I know always says: 'If something's wrong with the pup, blame the bitch.' "

The Slytherins murmur at my clever insult. Draco glares. "Potter's just jealous because he doesn't have a mother anymore."

Oh, there's a line he shouldn't have crossed! "Draco, you just don't get it, do you? I've all but run Snape out of this school. It's only a matter of time now. When he's gone, there will be no one left to protect your miserable hide. You've got a long three years ahead of you. You got off lucky with that little mark."

I scan the faces of the rest of the Slytherins. "I've got nothing against the rest of you, but fair warning, if you involve yourself in his plans, I will show no mercy."

Draco looks close to pulling his wand. The host of the party sees it as well. Clearly, this isn't how he hoped things would proceed.

"Potter," Krum warns. "These are my guests. You will treat them as such."

I paste a faux smile on my face, "My apologies, Viktor. Do you need a refill?"

"No."

Fleur places her hand on my shoulder. She gestures to the Veela and says forcefully, "Refill their drinks. I will handle this table."

The five Veela continue to ply their charms against me as I refill their wine. So, they're not just here to bother Fleur. I wonder what else he's got up his sleeve

"Having a good time tonight? Is there anything else I can get for you ladies?" I add a slight leer, which probably looks ridiculous on my fourteen year old face.

"I doubt there is anything a little boy like you could get me," says the Veela who seems to be riding herd over the group. I feel her ratcheting up the charm. "Would you like to know what I consider a good time?"

I shake my head and laugh. "Not particularly, wench. Funny, I thought you pure-blooded Veela were known for your control. I didn't realize you were into teenagers."

Her playful and manipulative look disappears. The other two that speak English scowl and translate for the rest. Five sets of angry eyes regard me. Padfoot always said I had a knack for angering women. I guess he's right.

"You would not even know what to do with one of us, little boy wizard."

I look over my shoulder. "Delacour over there is three times the woman you'll ever be. Magical allure is one thing, but if you've seen one pretty face, you've seen them all. True beauty will always be in the eyes of the beholder and, frankly, I what I see here doesn't come close to measuring up to her."

The woman's features narrow, becoming more avian. Spending time around The Hat is really paying dividends. I top off the rest of their glasses and walk back to the kitchen with a smile on my face.

Back in the kitchen, I find Fleur slicing meat from a roast. It is tender and pink, nearly as red as her face. "How are you holding up?" I ask casually.

"Must you antagonize them?" Her wandwork cracks the plate and I see her frustration building. My angry witch alarm starts to wail.

"I could try and ignore them like you. How's that working for you, by the way?"

She grabs another plate and hovers the meat onto it. "I do not engage in pointless name calling and posturing. I thought you English were supposed to be stoic."

I put my hand on hers and ease her wand to the countertop. "Krum is just trying to push our buttons. You're letting him succeed. Don't let those Veela rattle you."

She shakes her head, "And you, over there insulting them..." The French witch drifts off into muttered curses in her native tongue.

"It wasn't an insult. It is the truth." I say.

Fleur stops and stares at me. "What did you just say?"

Maybe it's the combination of adrenaline and the overabundance of Veela aura. Hell, Fleur seems to have less even less control than usual. Either way, I'm all for finding a way to ease the tension between us.

Stepping closer, I say, "I said that I was telling them the simple truth. None of them will ever be able to measure up to you. Beauty is something more than a magical aura. You have it, they don't."

She's emotionally off-balance and I've already made my choice.

I kiss her.

She doesn't resist. Instead of a tender peck on the lips, this is powerful and fueled by raw emotions; anger, lust, disappointment, surprise, irritation, and passion swirl like a hornet's nest around us, looking for release. The only thing certain in that moment is that I'm not a solo participant.

My hands snake around her waist, resting in the small of her back as her hands cradle my face trying to force our lips closer. I drift off the lips to the side of her neck tasting the softness of her skin both unable and completely unwilling to stop.

When she makes a slight moan, it breaks the spell over her. Realization replaces naked lust. I stop and pull back slightly seeing the flush in her face. She pushes me back, forcefully into one of the hard wooden tables. The back of my head strikes the low hanging pots.

"No!" she growls. "We are not doing this!"

"Fleur, wait!"

"You ... you ... this is not ... arrgh! I am finished here! I am leaving!" She practically screams and rips the apron off.

Turning, she pushes the door to the galley open and storms out of the kitchen. While I try to regain my composure and figure out what the hell just happened. I hear her yell at Krum. "I've had enough of this, Krum!"

"Don't go so soon, Delacour! You haven't seen the newest addition to our trophies. It's a magnificent specimen. Look! Up there!"

I start heading towards the kitchen door, when I hear a strangled cry. I step through only to see Fleur's retreating form running up the steps and hearing the raucous laughter of the others. I look up to where some of them are staring and see a bunch of animal heads. At a loss for what's happening, I gaze at Athena and she gestures at an area. In the middle of them, I spot a single head.

It's a pronghorn. Viktor must have been plotting this ever since Rita mentioned Monsieur Pronghorn in her articles.

"That's a new low, Krum – even for you!"

"I am not interested in your approval, Harry Potter," he answers in a disinterested tone.

I glare at him, realizing what an arrogant piece of shit he's allowed himself to become. There's no need to search for extra malice in my voice for emphasis. "Don't forget, Viktor. We still have one more duel. I was toying with you last time. Next time, you suffer."

"You are not done serving here, Harry Potter. I do not release you from your obligation. Get back to the kitchen."

"Lucky for me there were no oaths sworn over this. It was just a bet among honorable competitors. Since you've shown exactly how honorable you are, fuck you, Viktor, and the boat you rode in on." Pulling off my apron, I race after Fleur.

I don't need the map to know where she's headed. Just inside the forest, I find the summoned grotto. I sprint across the ward line.

She's on her knees with her face buried in her hands, sobbing uncontrollably.

"Fleur..." I step next to her and crouch. My wand drops a quick warming charm over the both of us.

"Go away, Harry." She hasn't even realized that I didn't trip the wards.

"It's a trick. Krum didn't kill your friend. He's just trying to get to you."

"How do you know? I haven't seen him in weeks!"

I take a deep breath. It isn't how I wanted to tell her. "Fleur, think about it. I didn't trigger your wards. I knew where this grotto would be. I'm bloody brilliant at Transfiguration."

She raises her head with tears still on her cheeks. The wheels are turning in her mind, but she's not there just yet. "What?"

"I'm an Animagus – a pronghorn Animagus. That's how I know Monsieur Pronghorn is safe. I'm him."

"You?"

"Yes. I've seen the real you, the one that doesn't keep everyone at a distance. It's why I'm even interested in the first place."

Fleur's face twists in anger. She shoves me angrily to the ground. "How could you?"

Her tirade is cut off by the wards triggering. They flare against the unseen intruder. The bushes are ripped in two and tossed aside. Behind them is the Geist, who is advancing on us.

"Time to suffer, human! Not longer safe in your school!"

Okay, my problem with Fleur needs to go on the back burner. The bushes are hurled at me. I banish them away. The poltergeist smashes the stone bench into my knee and I go to the ground in agony.

I stab my wand at it and go right for the Darker Magic and cast a Spirit Shackle. Coils of magical energy encircle it. It struggles hopelessly inside of it. The bench rises up again, but Fleur banishes it out of the grotto. The Geist pelts me with stones, levitated from the edge of the pond, as well as chunks of earth, as I force it to the ground.

It's not as hopeless as I'd like. The Geist begins to break through the shackles and continues to hurl whatever it can at me. Fleur's quick wandwork protects me, for the most part, though. I immobilize my leg, so I can somewhat stand on my mangled knee.

I try lightning, it worked last time. Funneling my anger, I stab my wand into the ground and call it from the sky, but the thing finally breaks free of the shackles and dives out of the way into the water and my bolt scorches the earth and sets fire to more shrubs. I furiously scan the pond for movement, ready to loose another Spirit Shackle upon it, but I see none. Suddenly, the winged monster bursts out of the water, spraying us and quickly closes on me.

At this range, lightning would fry all of us, so I count my blessings that I've studied up on spells that affect the paranormal. "Darts for the Dead" perforate it and it screams. Fleur uses a banisher, which forces it backwards, but not very far. A protective blessing – normally performed on a house – sends a wave of agony through it. Fleur keeps shoving away at it, likely the only spell she knows that will do anything to a Poltergeist.

The Geist responds with a sudden leap and a clawed hand that swats me into the remaining hedges. I disappear into the tangles, but stagger to my feet eventually, though not without many cuts and nicks. I almost have to dive back into them, though: the Geist advances on Fleur, and has enough time to fling the dish of a bird bath at me – a

spinning saucer of death. I banish it away wandlessly and cast a new set of shackles on it.

The Geist struggles against them, which gives Fleur enough time to run up next to me. She grabs my arm. "We need to get back to the safety of the castle. I can come back for the amulet."

My spells are working well enough and a better idea comes to mind. "Fleur, can you close the grotto on it? I can hold it here."

"Yes, but what purpose will that serve?"

I balance myself against her. "I can draw a protective circle around it and keep it trapped. You go to the castle. Find the nearest ghost and tell them I need their help with this thing. They'll know what to do. Now, seal it!"

Fleur chants and the grotto fades. I motion for her to hurry. The amulet begins shaking on the ground. Hopping forward, I crouch on my one good knee and support myself with my left arm. The Holly wand draws a crooked circle around it and I scribble protective runes in the dirt.

"Got you now!" I yell partly from the pain and mostly from the sense of victory. The amulet shudders as I continue the binding chant. Normally, I'd need to cut myself and add blood to the binding. The leg injury is the lemon from which I get to make lemonade. Exposed bone and flesh through my pant leg allows me to dampen my wandtip in the wound.

On the ground, the amulet continues to vibrate. I draw a larger, better circle outside of the first. My breathing is ragged. The bushes shredded my clothes and scraped my skin. The shitty thing is that I need to keep up the chant and can't spare any time to treat my wounds. To make matters worse, I have no idea where my glasses are. Everything beyond a few feet is a blur.

Minutes pass and the pain from my scrapes begins to throb. I start to see fuzzy shapes coming approaching from the castle and breathe a sigh of relief.

"Hello, descendant. You look somewhat worse for wear. We came as soon as we could."

"I've had better days – worse too, come to think of it. Either way, you're right on time." I stop the chant and summon my glasses. I want to be able to see this. After all, I've more than paid the price of admission.

There are at least a dozen ghosts standing next to William Potter. The ancient knight draws his phantom sword stained with the blood of a Catholic saint. The Friar pulls a cudgel from his robes. The eyes of Sir Nicholas gleam with an unhealthy fascination and he cracks his knuckles in anticipation of a real fight.

As the Grey Lady hikes up the robe on her left leg and removes an ethereal dagger from a sheathe located on her calf, I'm reminded that these people weren't always ghosts and most of them died horrible and violent deaths, leaving them filled with regret and anger.

Peeves looks nothing like his prankish self. The Hogwarts Poltergeist looks more like a tiny demon.

"Rotty Potty caught the Shysty Geisty?" It's a tone that sends a chill down my spine.

"Yes, Peeves. He did." The Baron answers.

"Lord Baron says Peeves is free to do whatever he wants?" The voice is child-like. The same can't be said for the intentions.

"Yes, Peeves. We're going to destroy it."

The little Poltergeist chuckles and that chuckle becomes a maniacal laugh.

Fleur comes alongside and helps me stand up. The remnants of the temporary binding circles fail as we stagger backwards.

"Fleur, open up your grotto. Lord Baron, the creature is all yours."

"My word is my honor, last of my line. If you can ensnare it again, this will go much quicker."

Fleur begins to realize what is going on. "Harry, you are going to destroy the Poltergeist? Is this wise?"

"No, they are going to do it. I'm just here to help. That thing was trying to kill us. I've got no qualms seeing it put down, Karkaroff and his school be damned. Please, just open the grotto."

She does, reluctantly and I immediately launch another set of spirit shackles around the Geist, who looks a trifle surprised. My spell is only partially successful. One clawed hand remains free and it pulls on the chain and yanks me into the dirt.

I only move a few feet more before the ghosts of Hogwarts begin their all-out assault with Lord Baron William Potter leading the way. His two-handed claymore cleaves one of the wings away. The Geist howls in anger and bashes the Slytherin ghost. He's thrown aside like a rag doll, but the others close rapidly. The Fat Friar clubs away at it, while Peeves and Sir Nicholas pile on. Peeves swells in size, taking on a nearly demonic form, and pounds his fists on the head of the creature. The Gryffindor house ghost grabs on to the Geist's free arm and holds on for whatever passes for dear life.

The battle rages as it keeps battering away at the spirits of the castle. The wounds they suffer would easily have been fatal, if they weren't already dead. I reinforce my shackles on it and watch my allies overwhelm it and I allow a grim smile at the sight of that fearsome creature being laid low by what most in the castle blatantly ignore.

It tries to shake them free, but the other spirits, including little Myrtle swarm the hell-spawn and drag it to the ground in an effort to pin it. I'll never look at the Grey Lady in the same light as she drives her dagger into the creature's soulless eyes again and again with a fury that almost defies description. A vaporous trail wafts skyward from the monster like a smoldering fire.

The Geist falters under the power of the ghosts whose strength is humbling to watch. They force the snarling creature face down to the ground as it continues to make shrill, unholy noises. When my shackles fade, it thrashes and redoubles its efforts to get free. The thing is leaking vapors from numerous wounds. Professor Binns relentlessly kicks it in the side, calling it a hobgoblin and screaming for it to die.

The Baron, sporting a huge dent in his armor and missing his helm, returns to the fray. His armored boot steps on the monsters neck and he inverts his massive sword raising the pommel well above his head for the coup de grace.

I manage some words of my own, "I didn't think you were stupid enough to leave the safety of the boat, monster. Couldn't resist coming after me. It's your last mistake. Baron, send it back to whatever hell it came from!"

"So let it be done," he says.

The others pick up the chant and despite my injuries, I feel a new sensation – a stirring of ancient magic, foreign to those who still draw breath and feel the warmth of life. It is something I probably shouldn't watch, perhaps not meant for the eyes of the living, but the voyeur in my feels the need to witness this.

They repeat it over and over, faster and faster until the Baron's blade drives down into the Geist, impaling it. Clear ichor splashes like a fountain as whatever force that held the phantasm together begins to unravel. From the corner of my eye, I see Fleur watching just as intently. I grab her hand, grateful for the contact with another living being.

It ends with the Durmstrang Poltergeist disintegrating with a scream that will haunt me for nights to come, but I think of what Athena said about how the creature was used as punishment at her school and know that this was the right thing to do.

The ghosts of Hogwarts all step back from the scorched and blackened area of Fleur's grotto, lost in their private thoughts. Many

of their ethereal bodies sport fresh injuries. I swallow hard, wondering if I will ever be able to undo this desecration. This grotto was a gift from her parents. I curse myself for not thinking of another way!

A voice breaks the heavy silence, "William," Sir Nicholas says, clearing his throat, "You did promise me that if you ever had that little knife of yours out again that you'd help me with my tiny problem."

Several of the ghosts howl with laughter as the Baron grants Nicholas' request and makes him "Completely Headless Nick."

Almost as one, the suddenly jovial group starts back towards the castle. The Baron stops to gather his damaged helm. Nick stumbles around trying to recover his severed head.

"Thank you, William." I offer him a slight, awkward bow, about all I can do without falling over.

"No thanks is necessary, Harry. If I am to be released from eternal damnation, it falls to you to perform the tasks required. But this, I would have done for you regardless, for a chance to feel alive again. There is greatness about you and I am honored to be in its glory, if only for a moment. Good night, Lord Potter, and to you as well, milady. Come, Peeves."

The remaining Poltergeist has returned to his normal, almost cherubic form. It holds a single finger to its lips. "Shhh! Rotty Potty shouldn't tell Dumb old Dumble Bumbles about little Peevseyweavesy. Best to let him think nothing about the harmless little Peeves roaming the castle."

It skips alongside my ancestor and I begin to wonder if I'll have to convince the Baron put it down before I free him to journey into the next life.

Fleur treats my scrapes and casts a sorrowful look at her paradise lost. The pain in my leg is dulled by a numbing charm. I thank her for shielding me while I bound the specter.

"It was all I could offer," she answers, "I did not even know there are spells that will harm a spirit."

I try to reassure her. "I'm sorry about your sanctuary. I know how much it means to you." I pause for a second. "I have a book in my possession. It's where I learned the shackles and the binding rituals. There are other spells in it, spells I can use to fix this. It will take time, but it will look just like before. I promise."

She stares at me, almost as if for the first time, and says in a quiet voice, "I believe you, Harry Potter."

"So, where does this leave us?" I ask, feeling the touch of her wand closing the tiny wounds all over my arms. There's a closeness and an intimacy filling the void left by the aftermath of the battle.

"I want to hate you. I have every reason to hate you."

"I know. But you don't, do you?" In the dim light, I look into the depths of her eyes, hoping for some reassurance.

"No, you are a hero. Even the spirits of the dead acknowledge this fact. It was you that warned me about the dragons. It was you when I was upset with Gabrielle. I can be angry that you spied on me, but I cannot deny all the good things you have done."

I smile a little for her "It's because I really do care, Fleur." I look her squarely in the eye, meaning clear.

She blinks, surprised at the honesty she's seeing in my eyes. She looks away. "It's too complicated..." she says, uncertainty evident in her tone, she's trying to dismiss the moment. I'm not going to let that happen, but I've got to be careful how I handle this. James had something special with Lily once and like that ruined grotto, it was taken from him in an instant. If I push her, she'll bolt like a deer and I'm in no shape to give chase.

I take one of her hands in both of mine, gently, without any force. "Complicated? No. It's really not, Fleur. it's the most uncomplicated thing there is, simple and absolute. Either it's there, or it isn't. For me,

it is. I felt it back at the Yule ball, and I think you might have felt it too."

She hesitates, then looks down at her hand in mine, then away, then turns back. And suddenly she's moving toward me, filling my vision.

It's not a fierce kiss like back at the ship, but something soft, frightened, and hesitant. Her lips are barely touching mine, but they're sweet, like honey, and I take comfort in them.

I remind myself that this calls for restraint and letting her set the pace. I participate in this gentle nuzzling and don't try to take any more than she's willing to give. Beneath the smells of sweat, dirt, and my blood there is her scent. I memorize it and try to burn it on my memory. One hand comes up to cup her cheek gently and run a few strands of her unkempt hair between my fingers.

Fleur's relaxed and I pick out a slight hint of her aura, a soft glow hinting at possibilities unrealized. She probably doesn't even know she's doing it.

In my mind, I thank that crazy Ravenclaw girl and her insane logic. She taught me an interesting lesson that I am trying to apply here. By encouraging Fleur to "pursue" me, I am actually pursuing her.

Naturally, the injured leg gives out and we topple to the ground. Like some bad comedy skit on the BBC, our heads smack together. I literally see stars and she yelps, but then laughs. It's not her usual guarded laugh. It's different, more sincere. Either way, she shows me something important right there, a side she'd only shown to Monsieur Pronghorn.

I take it as a sign that this is going well – except, of course, for my fractured leg and numerous other injuries. Numbing Charms are great, but they can mask things like internal bleeding.

We start to kiss again, but I come to a decision and stop my roaming hands. The practical side of me wins out, damn it to hell. I pull my head back.

"What is it? Am I going too fast?" She asks sounding worried. In all this, I had forgotten that she thinks I'm a kid.

"No, it's just the charm on my leg is going to wear off, very soon. And then, I'm going to be in a bit of pain. As much as I'd like to stay and continue this, we need to go to the infirmary."

Fluer looks embarrassed and helps me to my feet before reclaiming her damaged magical amulet. "I'm sorry. I got carried away."

I grin as she helps me hobble in the direction of the castle and say, "There's nothing to be sorry for. I rather like being carried away – in the figurative sense; not with a limp, mind you."

My joke gets another one of those laughs out of her as I continue. "I hope you will allow me a chance to make up for this horrible first date."

With a bemused smile, she answers, "I think I would like that, although part of me dreads what you might possibly do for an encore."

Reaching up with my right hand, I take her right hand that's wrapped around my body and press the back of it to my lips, I kiss it. "Hopefully, you'll settle for a quiet place where we can just snog, without something trying to kill either of us."

Fleur shakes her head. "You English. You take the act of kissing and reduce it to something that sounds like what an animal would do in a barn. I will never understand this. You will not 'snog' with me, Harry Potter. I do not like that word. We will kiss and you will like it."

Her terms are reasonable enough – I cut her some slack. I suppose it isn't much to ask. She's French – she can't help having a few annoying habits. What more can I say? Though, I suppose I should go ahead and remove "shag" from my vocabulary as well. I don't want to find out what her reaction to that particular word would be.

Author's Notes – Hope you enjoyed it. My original story collection is now out on Amazon. Visit my profile and my home page if interested in acquiring. I had a lot of help making this chapter as good as it is. Rob and Garret take another bow.

This story has about 5 or 6 chapters left. There will be a sequel. Odds are that I will be putting TML on hold to finish Lie. It has all the momentum right now, but I do have a spectacular end in mind for TML.

Disclaimer—Just another fanfic.

Acknowledgements—As always, the help from the gang at Alpha Fight Club is worth noting. Beta work by ZanyMuggle, Rob, Aaran St Vines and Sparky40sw.

Chapter 21—Mind Your Manners

"Just a minute." I hear Poppy's voice on the other side of the door. Fleur has her wand on the crystal buzzer that vibrates in the Nurse's room.

After we had tried the first set of steps, Fleur gave up and floated me the rest of the way. Here from my vantage point, looking right at her bum, I put on a grin and ask, "Is it okay that I tell people that by the end of our first date, you had swept me off my feet?"

"You are impossible!" she mutters, but there's a hint of a smile amidst her protest.

Poppy opens the door. She looks at me and shakes her head. "What happened this time, Harry?"

"A stone bench," I answer, while Fleur floats me in. Poppy gestures for her to put me on a bed.

"A bench did that?" She looks at Fleur. "Do I need to check him for head injuries?"

My new girlfriend laughs. "I did not see him suffer one, though I would suspect you would find past evidence of many such injuries."

Poppy chuckles and says, "You're probably right."

"Hey! That's not funny," I protest.

The nurse arches an eyebrow and starts straightening my bones. "From my perspective it is. So was a troll wielding this bench like a club?"

"No, it was a Poltergeist."

"Peeves?"

"No, the Durmstrang Poltergeist."

"I thought your little wager thing had been canceled."

"And who told you that?" I grunt as the Numbing Charm is removed.

"Professor Snape."

"Well, there you go."

Poppy looks plenty angry and summons an elf. She sends the elf to go get McGonagall. Next, she summons a few vials from her storeroom and uncorks them.

"How about we just leave the Numbing Charm on?" I ask hopefully. There are some nasty tasting potions hovering next to her.

"No. Not until I see how you respond to the first set of potions. I'll put it back on after that."

"Oh, alright." I choke two of them down, while she pours the third directly on the wound.

Fleur sits next to me and holds my hand while I try to digest these foul draughts. By the time Minerva arrives, Poppy has me in a splint and has thankfully re-charmed my leg. I'll give the nurse her due. No one in this castle can cast a Numbing Charm like she can.

I greet McGonagall. "Hello, Professor. We missed you at dinner."

She takes the news rather well. "Did this happen to you on the Durmstrang vessel, Mr. Potter?"

"No, but it was their Poltergeist that did it. Fleur and I were just inside the Forbidden Forest."

"Why did you go into the Forest?"

Fleur answers. She seems to have a lot on her mind, and it comes tumbling out before McGonagall or I can interject a word, "He was concerned about my welfare. The Geist attacked at that time. I would like to use a Floo if possible. My father is at the embassy in London and I would like to speak to him as soon as possible. I doubt he will be pleased that I was attacked this evening."

"Yes. I completely understand. This elf will take you to my office; you may use the Floo there to call him. Mr. Potter will tell me what has occurred in the meantime."

Fleur releases my hand and then gives me a quick kiss on the cheek. "I will return shortly."

Minerva and Poppy watch the graceful witch depart, both of them giving me suspicious glances as the door closes. My head of house gives me a stern look.

"Now, Mr. Potter, I believe you have several things you need to tell me."

"You're fired, Mr. Snape," Minerva says the moment Snape steps into the infirmary. "Pack your things and leave. By breakfast tomorrow, I do not wish to find you in this castle."

"What lies has the boy been spreading now?"

"It is not his lies that concern me, Mr. Snape, but yours. You lied to me and said in the presence of several others that the Potter's dinner on board the Durmstrang vessel was canceled."

"That was what I was told," he answers with smug arrogance. "Perhaps I was misled."

"Yet some of your Slytherins were on that ship for this dinner. You would be the only one that could have granted permission."

"Were they? I suppose I shall have to speak with them about it."

"No."

"No?"

McGonagall draws herself up to her full height—tartan fury in all its glory. "I have changed my mind. You will leave the castle this very instant. Your possessions will be delivered to Hogsmeade by the castle elves. I have had my fill of you. Your petty vendetta against the Potter family not only led to an attack on him, but on the French Minister's daughter. You have brought shame and disgrace on this castle and I will see you removed—immediately!"

Snape laughs. "Fine, McGonagall. Enjoy the temporary trappings of power. We shall see what happens when the true master of this castle returns."

"Albus won't have a choice."

"And why is that?"

With her back to me, I can only "hear" the smile on her face. "Because I'll make him choose between the two of us."

Poppy steps out of her office and regards Snape. "If he's fool enough to keep you, I'll be resigning as well."

McGonagall nods to Madame Pomfrey. "By the morning, Flitwick and Sprout will be on board as well, and I intend to present a united front to Albus."

I'm so glad I won that Pensieve! I can probably charge admission from three quarters of the student body just to watch this.

Snape is a calculating fucker. I'll give him that. He knows when he is beaten. The pasty-faced half-blood prince shrugs. "I suppose this is the part where I degenerate into petty insults and make pointless threats."

"Actually," I say to the greasy bastard, "I think this is the point where you leave."

There's a slight smile on his face. It's a dangerous one. "Yes, whelp. For once, you and I are in agreement. It is time for me to go. I'm certain our paths will cross again."

"I'm not the one you should be worried about, Snivellus. Wait until my godfather finds out that you don't have Dumbledore's protection. I just want you dead. He wants to be the one to do it."

He spins and then disappears through the doorway, only to be replaced with a Durmstrang student, who is hovering Millicent Bulstrode. The Slytherin witch is whimpering. Her robes are burnt and her arm is clearly broken.

Poppy steps out. "What in the name of Merlin?"

The boy mumbles something in German. "Speak in English!" she commands, giving the wizard a fright.

"The ship behaving like it is cursed. Take this one. I must go back and help beach it before it sinks."

"What is happening?"

He points his finger directly at me. "I think it is all his fault!"

The wizard leaves and Minerva turns to me. I hold up my bandaged hands. "Don't look at me. It was still intact when I left. Maybe this is all one big coincidence."

"Do you really expect me to believe that?"

"I just went onto the ship and served dinner."

"You're forgetting the encounter with their Poltergeist, Harry."

That stops me. I had considered what would happen to the Geist if the ship were destroyed, but not the exact opposite. I quickly piece together what is happening out there. A big smile spreads across my face and I laugh. "Oh, that's priceless! They arrange for me to be on their boat and trick you into not coming so there wouldn't be any adult supervision. Well, if the Geist was that important to their bloody rowboat, someone should have stopped it from trying to kill me and Fleur."

"Harry, I'm not sure that is the proper attitude."

"Oh, I'm sure they'll try to pin this one on me, but they're still going to have to explain how—and more importantly why—their Geist attacked me and Fleur. The harder they push, the worse it's going to look for them! It's brilliant!"

McGonagall processes this and doesn't seem to appreciate the beautiful irony. Very slowly, she says, "The next time Albus is away from the castle and I am in charge, you are not allowed to leave Gryffindor tower—even for class. You will stay up there until he returns. Is that understood?"

"So you want whatever is going to happen to happen in Gryffindor tower?"

"Yes...No! I'm getting too bloody old for this." McGonagall wanders out of the room to deal with the crisis, muttering under some very unladylike things her breath.

About ninety minutes later, I'm leaning on a crutch and staring out the window. On one side of me is Fleur, and on the other is Millicent Bulstrode, whose arm is in a cast—my own version of 'The Good, The Bad, and the Ugly'. Below us, we see the tiny pops of house elves unloading the Durmstrang ship and trying to make it lighter. Smoke pours out of the portholes and at least two fires are burning up on deck. Magical tents dot the surrounding shore as the weary students of that school dig in for a very long night. Frankly, I can't

muster up a great deal of pity for them. One rotten apple spoils the bunch.

The ship is listing about thirty degrees. It's pure Marauder beauty, even if I didn't intend for it to happen, and further proof of the consequences of crossing a Potter. Padfoot is going to be so jealous when I tell him about this night. I don't care how many witches he's currently sleeping with—I helped destroy a Poltergeist, badly damaged the Durmstrang ship, got the girl, and got Snape fired. He'll have to work pretty damn hard to top that.

"Next time Draco wants to screw with you, Potter, I'm taking a sleeping draught and turning in early. I don't need this shit."

"So what exactly happened down there?" I ask Millicent.

"Draco was busy congratulating Krum on humiliating the two of you when all the lights went out on the ship. It seemed like no big deal at first, but then the wood started creaking and it felt like the ship was in heavy seas, and I'm thinking, this is the Great Lake, right, and not February in the North Atlantic. So we start trying to get back on the main deck when the kitchen bursts into flames and the fireplace starts spitting out flaming logs. A chunk of one smashed into my bloody arm and set me on fire! That effing little ponce, Draco, he damn near trampled me trying to get out of there."

I try very hard not to laugh at her misfortune. "Sounds like his style. What happened next?"

"People were screaming. There was water coming in on the lower decks. The four ghouls and the Ineri they had in the hold got loose..."

"What were they doing with ghouls and zombies in the hold?"

"Damned if I know, Potter. Ask them if you're so effing interested."

Fleur answers. "They use them as practice targets for Dark Magic. My date for the Yule Ball somehow thought this would impress me."

Both Bulstrode and I stop and stare at her for a moment before I ask, "Is that the strangest pickup line someone's tried on you?"

She sighs, "No. There have been worse."

"It'd probably have worked on me," Millicent mutters.

"You're into freaky encounters with the undead?" I ask, somewhat surprised, just before I notice that a group of Durmstrang students sporting several injuries has just wandered into the entrance. Poppy starts sorting them. I should go help, but she did tell me I have the rest of the night off. I should really try to sleep and prepare for tomorrow's competition. The only champion in a position to do well, at this point, is Cedric.

"No! I just wouldn't mind having a date," says the Slytherin.

"Then go get a date. Plenty of boys in the castle."

"I'm fat and ugly. Don't patronize me, Potter!" She growls.

"I'm not patronizing you. If you don't like the way you look, fix it. Use some magic. Brew a few potions, use some creams, or layer some charms into your hair. Muggles have long and painful surgeries to enhance their looks. You just have to drop a few galleons for a similar effect or look into some fancy rituals."

"Pansy said I shouldn't waste my time."

"It's Parkinson that's a waste of your time. You're a cursed fool for even listening to her! If you're really curious, brew an aging potion. See what you'll look like at twenty. Changing your appearance is pretty easy. Look real close at Athena Manos and you'll spot that she's fairly plain under all the creams, salves, and charms."

She shakes her head. "That kind of look is expensive to maintain."

"Then learn how do your own creams and wand work. Am I right Fleur?"

"Yes and no," Fleur answers. "Do it because you want to, not for the sake of boys. You will find all of them this age are struggling with they're own changes. Find a look you are comfortable with."

"That's easy for you to say."

Bulstrode withers under Fleur's irritated glare as the latter says, "No amount of potions and charms will give you self worth, girl. Only you can do that."

I'd already forgotten how Fleur can be with someone she doesn't know. Deciding changing the subject would be best at this point, I say, "Hey, I wouldn't mind watching that memory of what happened on the ship in my Pensieve. Would you mind sharing it with me, Millicent? They're already trying to blame me for it, so I might as well enjoy the show."

"Four galleons."

"Say again?" What is it with everyone wanting money from me?

"If I'm going to try some beauty salves, the good ones aren't cheap—four galleons."

"I will pay half, Harry. I am just as curious," Fleur offers.

Bulstrode's memory is far more entertaining than I thought it was going to be. I even catch Fleur grinning at the complete and utter mayhem. Paintings screaming in German, Polish, and Bulgarian, mixed with the howls of the mounted animal heads. I feel a slight bit of vertigo as the ship starts to list violently. To top things off, there's Krum's terrified expression as he's trying to get everyone out of the galley and up to the main deck. It's the look of a person who knows that he's utterly fucked.

I see Athena and her two bodyguards and feel bad for her. She's been decent through most of the tournament and was looking out for my best interests when I was on board.

Then again, she only got a little scare. I'm the one in the splint. Let the merriment resume.

"I believe you are enjoying this a bit too much, Harry," Fleur says, with a hint of her usual sarcasm.

"And which one of us secretly wants to come back and see those bitchy Veelas screaming in terror over and over again?"

She looks elsewhere to hide the smile. In the false reality of the Pensieve, I can move normally. I instinctively dodge the flaming log that breaks Bulstrode's arm, which gives Fleur another reason to laugh.

"You were talking with the girl about aging potions like you have some experience."

"I've got a good idea what I'll look like in my early twenties. Why, you think if I look older, society will be more accepting of the dashing Triwizard champion and his beautiful girlfriend?"

"You have not won this yet, Harry Potter. I may very well be on top—"

"Really?"

"—by this time tomorrow. Of the tournament standings, you idiot!"

Apparently she's already started trying to figure out how my mind works. I laugh and immediately change the conversation to keep her off balance. "So, tell me more about yourself, Fleur."

"Here, now?" She seems surprised, but in a good way.

"Why not? No one can eavesdrop. There's not enough room in the Pensieve for another person and the memory will just reset and keep playing. I don't know about you, but I'm having a good time."

"You first. Tell me something I don't know about Harry Potter."

"I went and saw Aimee in France. I told her that I was Monsieur Pronghorn."

"She knew! That's why she was pestering me!"

I get a little disoriented as the memory resets to the beginning and everyone is back at the tables. Fleur stops to watch the memory of me scold Krum as I chase off after her. I'll have to thank Bulstrode for including that bit.

"Yeah, but I made her promised to keep it a secret. I wanted to be the one to tell you. We could always go visit her together and have a bit of fun. I'll go in first with my invisibility cloak and start asking for advice on how I can ask you out, when you show up for a visit."

Fleur gets a curious expression on her face. "So when did you plan on telling me?"

"I was going to wait and see if you came back and asked me out again. I planned on going out on a date or two to see if we were really compatible, and then I was going to tell you. The first date? No, that's not the kind of thing you mention on a first date, except under duress, like tonight. By the way, thank you for that night with Charlie Weasley and the other bloke. That was the one thing that convinced me that I needed to get to know you better. You've got a good heart." I pause a moment. "The rest of you isn't bad either."

Wow, I just made her blush.

"Aimee kept warning me about you after the Yule Ball. She said that you would shamelessly flirt and just when she thought she had you pegged, you would say things that no fourteen year old would ever say and it would render her speechless. Now, I see what she meant. It is hard to believe how my opinion of you has changed from the day you were selected to participate in the tournament."

"I could always back out and put that memory in here," I offer. "It would be a good laugh."

Fleur shakes her head and says, "No. I would not mind watching the broom race from your perspective sometime, but my behavior among people I do not know well can be caustic. I do not wish to revisit it." She, too, pauses for a moment. "I just thought of something ... I was under the impression that the law requires you to register abilities such as being an Animagus. One thing I will say is that you should not reveal anything to Gabrielle that you do not wish the world to know. She does not know how to keep anything a secret."

There's a tinge of older sibling anger there. "I'll keep that in mind. Maybe it's just your secrets she won't keep, but I understand what you are trying to say. As for registering, the law is written in a manner that an adult wizard or witch must register his or her form and on his or her seventeenth birthday...well, I'll worry about that then."

"Clever." She's obviously capable of sudden topic shifts, as well. "Do you want to appear as a couple in public, or do you wish for us to be more discreet?"

I like how open the two of us can be with each other. It's a refreshing change from what I expected dating "again" was going to be like. "That really depends on you, Fleur. No one is going to come up to me and say, 'Harry Potter! You're dating Fleur Delacour. What on Earth are you thinking?' People will ask you what you are thinking. In addition to the silly questions, there's the more serious part—there have been and will be more attempts on my life. You're smart enough to know that it could possibly expand to include you. You're also powerful enough to hold your own. It's your call. I'm pretty good at sneaking around when necessary. I can be discreet."

"Really? History shows that you also seem quite capable of destroying everything in sight. I believe tonight is a prime example of this."

I smile; she does have a point. "That's where I'm discreet. Everyone else will be thinking of the ship or the Geist. I'll be thinking about something much more important that happened."

My bravado gets another pause out of her. "You do have a way with words, Harry. A girl could get used to being flattered so. Assuming we

last as a couple to the summer, I have racing season. My last boyfriend could not deal with that lifestyle. Will you be able to?"

"I'll have to spend the early part of the summer with my Muggle relatives, but later, it would be nice to travel with you on tour."

"Why? From what I understood, you dislike your Muggle family." We both shift as the memory of the ship shudders. This likely coincides with Fleur closing the grotto on it and somewhat blocking the connection that the Geist shared with the vessel.

I open my palms to her in a gesture of sincerity and say, "I will be as open with you as possible, Fleur, but there are secrets I am not prepared to divulge. Not now, maybe in time. I'll make up for it by honestly answering as much as I can and being upfront about what I won't answer. Most all my secrets lead back to the half-dead wizard who still wants to kill me."

"I understand, Harry. I will be as truthful with you as possible in return," she says. I notice her suppressing a yawn. I'm rather knackered myself. It's been a rather productive evening and it's time to try and get some rest.

"Well, it seems like we're off to a good start, then," I add, before looking around. "I've seen enough of this ship. Shall we exit? We do still have to put on a show for the crowd tomorrow... Well, actually, I suppose it's today already."

"Yes, I should try to get some rest. We'll have to pick a memory to watch tomorrow after the challenge is over."

"I'd very much like to see Beauxbatons through your eyes. I've never been there before and you are always talking it up. How about giving me a tour?"

From the look on her face, I seem to be hitting all the right marks, so far. We exit the Pensieve and I bottle Bulstrode's memory, so I can send it to Sirius soon. I summon Dobby to take the Pensieve back to Gryffindor Tower. Fleur and I find ourselves behind a curtained partition with several injured Durmstrang students on the other side of

the fabric. In the muted light, the stains on her clothes aren't visible and all the other traces of tonight's hardships fade away, leaving me in the presence of an angelic witch who seems quite taken with me.

"Good night, Fleur." I lean in to kiss her, and she rewards me with something that lasts much longer than the usual good night peck.

"It's going to be hard to get to sleep after that," I say, when she breaks away.

"For you, yes. I hope it will not affect your concentration tomorrow," she replies with an evil grin, before tracing her index finger down my cheek. "Good night, Harry."

I guess she isn't the only one in this relationship who has to stay on her toes.

"And what do you intend to do about this, Dumbledore? The ship is a precious magical artifact belonging to my school and flies the flag of the German, Bulgarian, and Polish Ministries. They will want answers and action," Igor Karkaroff demands, going on the offensive.

They roused me out of bed at seven in the bloody morning for this exercise in stupidity. Hell, I couldn't even find Hat this morning to bring it along. I clutch the mug of coffee in my hands and try to mentally command the caffeine in it to work faster. An anxious Amos Diggory is seated next to Dumbledore probably wondering if his promotion to International Magical Cooperation was really worth it.

"Will they also be asking why the Geist attempted to kill two of the more notable students at this school—and might I add the two students that happen to be ahead of your champions in this tournament?" Dumbledore asks in a tone that almost sounds friendly, but clearly isn't.

"I do not control the Geist when it is off the ship! Only when it was on board could I command it."

"On one hand, you claim no responsibility for a creature's aggressive actions, but you seem to be insisting that I punish my student for defending himself and another student. Since you say it was uncontrollable, we can only conclude that Miss Delacour was also going to be attacked. Tell me, did it need your permission to leave the ship?"

"No, it was not confined to the ship. It often wandered into the so-called Forbidden Forest to amuse itself. Back to the matter at hand—the damage to the ship—"

"Fuck you, Karkaroff," I say, slamming my mug on the table. "I've had enough of this nonsense!"

Karkaroff is momentarily stunned; he's probably never had a student stand up to him. "Albus, if you can't control your student, I may be forced to spell his mouth shut."

"Pull the wand, Karkaroff. See what happens next."

"Harry, please calm down."

"Respectfully, sir, I will not. His beast took a run at me last night, and for that, it was destroyed. Then he has the nerve to come here, demanding some kind of apology or punishment. We can do this aboveboard. I'll be happy to draw out a memory of what happened on the ship and take it to the press. They'd have a field day with Krum's behavior, the little cheat Malfoy sitting at his side as an honored guest, and the part where he terrorized Fleur with a Pronghorn head. Yeah, bet that would cost Krum a few sponsors and do wonders for your school's image, wouldn't it?"

"We are not here to discuss Viktor's behavior, boy. You would do well to mind your manners."

"I guess that makes two of us. You would also do well to remember that this is England and your Geist just attacked me, Harry Potter. A few choice words to Minister Fudge and you might be more concerned about how you're going to barter your way out of Azkaban a second time!"

Dumbledore clears his throat. "I doubt that would do much for the spirit of cooperation this tournament is trying to foster, but Harry does have a point, Igor. Your students lost a night of sleep and appear to have a good deal of work ahead of them, but the most severe injuries were suffered by Mr. Potter. Since you have stated that you are not responsible for the actions of your Poltergeist when it is off of your vessel, I may also say that I am not responsible for the actions of Harry Potter when he is off school grounds. We have established that both he and Miss Delacour were a few hundred yards into the Forbidden Forest and that Miss Delacour was being comforted by Mr. Potter after a particularly callous joke was perpetrated by Mr. Krum. At most, I can admonish Mr. Potter for leaving school grounds, but since he was showing kindness to the distraught Miss Delacour, I quite understand his rationale for straying into the forest."

"So, that is your stance, Dumbledore. A priceless relic lies damaged, perhaps beyond repair, and you do nothing—less than nothing, in fact. You look like you want to reward the delinquent. I admire your inaction, so much so that perhaps I will emulate it."

The old man strokes his long white beard, absorbing Igor's threat, and absently says, "Nothing? Inaction? Oh, quite the contrary, Igor. I will be happy to offer the services of my Runes instructor and my NEWT-level Runes students in the repair. It presents a fascinating opportunity for their educational benefit—a true chance to work together in the spirit of this tournament."

Dumbledore then stops the nice wizard act and looks as serious as I've seen him during life and death fights. He brings a bit of the "fire and brimstone" look to his demeanor and there is a sudden chill in the room exuding from the Supreme Mugwump.

"Naturally, with a Poltergeist of my own in this castle; I can accept that you may have had only limited control of yours. But since it is now destroyed, I know that there will be no further unsanctioned attacks on Mr. Potter. For if there was another attack or some attempted retaliation, Igor, I would most assuredly hold you accountable. And whatever destruction young Harry here would visit upon you, you could expect it threefold from me."

I toy with the idea of asking if thrice dead is even possible, but I don't want to be rude and interrupt Albus while he's figuratively gnawing on Karkaroff's hide.

In a flash, the anger is gone, like it was never there. Even with my understanding of Occlumency, I can't change directions as fast as Albus. Damn, he's good!

In the same pleasant tone that he started the conversation in, he says, "Fortunately, I am confident that you have your visiting contingent firmly under your control now, Igor, so my mutterings are those of an old man concerned for the safety of all who walk this school's hallowed grounds."

Igor doesn't back down. "You are quick to offer threats, friend Albus. It's been well over ten years since you've held a wand in anger, and I am less frightened of the man before me than the man that defeated Grindelwald a half-century ago. Your best magic is behind you and you may be very surprised if you were to come to me with the notion of visiting harm. Of course, I am also glad we are talking in conjecture, dear friend. Thank you for the kind and generous offer of assistance, but we will repair our vessel. Now, if you will excuse me, I need to meet with the French delegation."

Sadly, I won't know for another few days if my "spyfly" survived last night's events. It's charmed to hang out in Karkaroff's cabin and record for five days before coming back to me. If I'm lucky, there should be something I can use.

Amos Diggory stands in the silence following Karkaroff's departure. "Good luck to you today, Harry. I'll have a few more questions for you, but they can wait. I've got enough to present a semblance of what happened to Minister Fudge. You should try to get some more rest before the competition."

"Thank you, sir." I watch the man leave and turn towards Dumbledore.

"You were quite busy last night, Harry. Minerva was waiting for me the moment I arrived in Hogsmeade. She was most distraught about

being misled. Though, she insisted that when I leave for the next outside function that I should bring you along. I did not see it as a request, more as a demand. At some point, when she has calmed, I expect she will extend a most sincere apology to you. Do be gracious."

"She means well. I don't think she'll ever let it happen again. I'd say that I'm sorry about Snape, but you and I both know that I wouldn't mean a word of it."

"Quite true on both counts. I had hoped that the two of you could look beyond your mutual differences, but in retrospect, that may have never been possible. Nevertheless, we must forge ahead. As you can well imagine, I am in need of a Potions Professor due to a surprise vacancy. I'll be sending an owl to Horace Slughorn today and inviting him to join me in my box to watch today's challenge and the Quidditch match to follow. Afterwards, we'll be having a private dinner, where I will recruit him. I suspect he will require some convincing, but that is where you come in, Harry. I know that you've been taking your lessons with Poppy, and that she is quite taken with you, but I am certain that Horace will want to see how you stack up against his memories of Lily. I know you won't let me down."

I groan at the prospect of a new version of the "Slug Club," but the old man will have none of it. "You seemed more than willing to do whatever it took to drive Severus from this castle, and I was forced to make a choice between the two of you—not that the outcome was ever in doubt. Still, since your wish has been granted, there is a bit more work to be done, and we must all do our part, isn't that right?"

"I suppose it is."

"Good luck today, Harry. I hope your leg does not become too much of a detriment to your performance. I also managed to speak with the Bloody Baron and was surprised to learn his true identity, and even more surprised to learn of your most honorable arrangement. Again, you cultivate allies in the most unusual places, Harry. Do keep up the good work."

I'm staring up at the floating platforms and the rotating targets as Cedric is preparing for his run. "With me at only about fifty percent, I'm pulling for you today to uphold the honor of Hogwarts. Show them how a Puff gets things done."

Cedric laughs and says, "I'll do my best. You look like hell, Harry, and the Durmstrang ship is wrecked on the shore of the lake and everyone knows you were involved. Seriously... What the bloody hell, mate?"

"It's a long story, Diggory. I'll tell you some other time."

Fleur's voice interrupts as she walks up, escorted by a short older man. He has a small beard and a look that seems perpetually irritated. "Papa, this is Harry Potter and Cedric Diggory."

"Hello," I say as Cedric does the same, except he adds a "sir," which reminds me that I need to dust off some manners. The Hat is a bad influence in that regard.

"Papa" has a pair of penetrating eyes and is currently giving me the once over. I wonder how much Fleur has told him.

"Armand Delacour at your service," The man introduces himself. "I hope your leg is on the mend."

I shrug. "It's going to hold me back, Minister, but I'll do my best. My hold on first place is somewhat tenuous at the moment."

An official approaches and gestures to Cedric. "We are ready for you."

He waves to the cheering crowd and heads for the starting point after I wish him good luck. I look back at Armand and arch an eyebrow, waiting for him to continue.

"As you can imagine, Fleur and I had a very long discussion this morning, and then I had the dubious pleasure of listening to Karkaroff

say that my daughter was never in danger as he attempted to pin this incident entirely on you."

The crowd gives Cedric a rousing cheer as I answer Mr. Delacour. "If you would like, I'll give you my version."

"Unnecessary; my daughter's is the only version I require. Naturally, I pressed her for details about your relationship, and—well, you probably are already acquainted with her openness."

"Yes, I am, sir."

"I haven't been forced to give the protective father speech in a long time, so I won't bother, and it's obvious that it is still early for the two of you. Idle threats from me obviously won't cow you. You've killed two wizards that I know of in the last six months and have enough rumors and speculation swirling about you for a person three times your age. What I will say to you is this—I consider my daughters to be my greatest legacy. Their happiness and safety is my reason for getting out of bed in the morning. Do not intentionally jeopardize them."

"I don't ever intentionally jeopardize myself, sir. It just kind of happens."

The man eyes me and my weak attempt at humor seems somewhat lost on his serious nature. He says, "I see. Normally, I don't involve myself in the lives of Fleur's current interest. Partly, that is because they usually do not last and mostly because they generally annoy me. They are usually five or sometime ten years older than Fleur and seek to immediately insert themselves as a permanent fixture in my daughter's life. Most eventually weaken and succumb to her charm, or begin making outrageous demands on her life, and try to ride the coattails of her fame. This is the first time I recall her dating someone younger than she is, and, if I may be blunt, more famous than she is. It is a rather interesting combination that may force me to shelve my usual disinterest and keep an eye on events."

It's a politically correct way of saying that he'll be watching me carefully. I can't really blame him. Would I trust any future daughter I might have with a bloke like me? Hardly.

Cedric is furiously Apparating around the course and launching piercing curses with abandon as I nod to Mr. Delacour. "We're both powerful enough and famous enough, in our own right, that we won't drown each other out. There aren't that many others that I could say that about, sir. I'll treat her with respect and as an equal with the hope that she will do the same."

"Very well, young man. Soon I will host a dinner at the embassy. My daughters and wife will, of course, be there. If Fleur chooses to bring you as an escort, I will be happy to speak with you at greater length."

He walks away and shares a brief conversation with the object of our discussion. Meanwhile, Cedric's score comes up—his time was impressive, but he loses some points in the accuracy portion of the event. It's still going to be tough to beat.

"Papa seems to like you," Fleur says, coming up to my side, as Athena moves to the starting line and waits for the course workers to finish repairing the targets. Athena looks a bit worse for wear. I'll be paying close attention to how she does.

"I suppose. My manners were a bit off, but hopefully, he'll give me a pass on that. It's a tad early for meet-the-parents day, but then again, with the fallout from last night, it was all a bit unavoidable, wasn't it? I hear there's to be a dinner at the Embassy."

"Yes. Mama will naturally want a turn at you, as well. Of my parents, she is the one that is truly a stickler for manners and etiquette."

"A vital part of the Beauxbatons' curriculum," I add with a grin.

"It is part of what sets us apart from the rabble," she answers, not rising to my bait. "Cedric's score is very good. Athena is not going to catch him. Do you think Krum is any good in the air without a broom?"

"Krum actually looks well rested. Bastard probably took a sleeping draught and let all the other Durmstrang students handle the small details of the ship falling to pieces."

We both watch Krum waving to the crowd as they repair the course from Athena's failed attempt at besting Cedric's score. Fleur answers with an amused chuckle, "You have an irritable streak, as well. I suspect we will have many fights."

"It'll make 'making up' that much more entertaining," I offer with a smile.

"Yes, you are correct. I look forward to seeing how you will attempt to apologize to me."

"What makes you think I'll be the one apologizing?"

She gives me a "oh please" stare, before laughing. "I do not need to be versed in Divination to see what is to come. Oh look, Viktor Apparated to the wrong platform. Maybe he was just trying to keep up appearances."

"Or, he stinks at this event. I like that one better."

She looks down at my leg and I see a flash of concern on her face. "How is your leg, cher?"

Did I just get a pet name? "Fifty-fifty that it makes it through the course without giving out."

"And your Apparating skills?"

"I'll be fine. Maybe I should splinch myself at the beginning and then I won't have to worry about the leg. Maybe Rita's article could be Potter Gives the Competition a Leg Up?"

"You're terrible! I do hope the majority of your jokes will not be about whichever body part you have recently injured. I am uncertain how you derive so much humor from pain! You really..."

"Fleur."

"Don't interrupt!"

"Fleur."

"What? Didn't I just tell you not to interrupt?"

It's more than a bit fun to watch Fleur get herself worked up. "Krum's finished. They want you at the starting line."

"Oh!"

I squeeze her hand. "Good luck. I'd say, 'Break a leg,' but you just told me not to make any more injury jokes."

Fleur walks away, shaking her head. I can't tell whether she wants to laugh or hex me—probably both.

I made it through eight of the fifteen platforms before the injured leg had enough and gave up on me. It was an awkward fall onto the ninth platform and I completely missed the first target from my new vantage point, a brutal deduction. That's where I lie now. I pull myself into a crouch and spell my leg in place. I don't want to risk putting a Numbing Charm on it, up here, with six more Apparitions ahead of me. That's a recipe for a splinch if ever there was one.

Gritting my teeth, I pop to the ninth platform and hear the crowd gasp as I almost go off the edge. Drawing two deep breaths, I take out the targets and focus on the tenth Apparition. I slow down, knowing that I'm already well off everyone else's pace. There's nothing left but to finish with dignity. I overpower my piercing curses and instead of thin holes the width of a wand tip through the targets, I'm making ones that are four and five times in diameter, which turns out to be a real crowd pleaser.

The holes just keep getting larger with every Percutio I unleash. Screw it! If I'm going down, it will be in style. On two of the final three

targets on the fifteenth and final platform, I core them and remove most of the bullseye. The spectators go absolutely spare. I fight off the part of myself that urges me to break out a firewhip and start hacking the close target to pieces—no need to be a show off there, Potter.

Finished, I Apparate to the ground and make certain I'm all "there" before applying the sweet bliss that is a Numbing Charm. Unlocking my leg, I limp back over to see my last-place finishing time. Hermione has found her way down to the field and is standing next to Fleur. I give her a loose hug and a clap on the back.

"Impressive for someone a full twenty seconds off the last time, even before the penalties are applied," Granger says.

"Well, if I did too well, there wouldn't be a need for the second set of duels and the final task of the tournament. They'd be presenting me with the trophy now."

This draws a bit of the "haughty" Fleur Delacour out of semi-retirement. "Yes, it is not a foregone conclusion. I hope you did not waste your time writing an acceptance speech."

I can see Hermione's protective nature flare up, but I cut it off before she unloads on Fleur. "We'll get them next time, Fleur. Regardless, you looked great up there."

"How is your leg, Harry?" Her tone becomes very gentle, and I see Hermione's stunned expression.

"With a Numbing Charm, it's okay—without it, not so much."

"Do you want to stay and watch the Quidditch match? My classmates know I despise any sport on a broom other than racing. They will not be offended and your school has more than enough fans here to cheer them on. I could easily be talked into being elsewhere."

There's no real need for me to watch Cho on my Firebolt. "Once we deal with the Press, let's get out of here."

"Harry, can I have a word with you?" Hermione says in her "take charge" voice, as the current overall standings are updated.

Fleur smiles, knowing what's coming next, and begs off to do her interviews.

I'm still in the lead with thirty-eight points. Fleur and Krum are nipping at my heels at thirty-five. Today's second place finisher, Athena, is trailing at twenty-six, and the winner of this task, and proof that a good night's rest is key to focus and multiple Apparitions, Cedric is a distant twenty-three, but a threat to be a spoiler in the final two events.

"You're dating Fleur Delacour. What on Earth are you thinking?" Okay, I was wrong; there is at least one person that would come up to me and ask that question.

"Yeah, it looks that way. You're dating someone three years older too, Miss Kettle."

Hermione isn't amused. Maybe it's the leg injury, but people usually laugh at my jokes—must be something in the water. "What, I'm the Pot-ter. It makes sense that you'd be the Kettle. If a certain friend of ours was here, I could call him 'Black' and complete the pun."

"Not funny, Harry. Do you know what you're doing?" She's got the foot-tapping thing going.

"Yes, I do." I put a hand on her shoulder. "Trust me, like I trust you. That's all I ask."

"I just don't want to see you get hurt."

"Hermione, you picked the worst possible year for that resolution," I reply with a lopsided grin on my face, before continuing, "Assuming I don't end up back in the infirmary tonight, you can corner me in the Common Room and I'll give you the rundown on what happened last night."

"Well, at least you're not chasing after her like some gibbering baboon. Just be careful of her charm."

"There's more to her than just an occasional glowing aura."

Hermione accepts that logic and I start to limp towards the vultures in the press tent. She suddenly sprints up next to me. She whispers rather urgently, "Wait just a second, Harry James Potter. I read up on Part-Veelas. The only time they achieve a perceptible aura is when they are aroused!"

"You don't say," I reply with a smirk. "Can I go play with the journalists now, please?"

"You! Common Room! Tonight! Or else!"

Her grasp over the English language seems to be slipping. That's a bad sign. I'd best be going now.

"Where've you been? You weren't up with the Gargoyle again, were you?" I bypass a few journalists to get over to the Sorting Hat and its golem body.

"McGonagall shanghaied me into helping beach the ship. I was there most of the night and into the morning. Suddenly, the incredible strength of this body is something of a liability."

"I could've used your help out there."

"Apparate better, shoot better, and try not to wreck your leg the night before. Do all that, and you won't finish in last place. Does that about cover it, or would you like some more encouragement?"

We watch Fleur getting grilled by the media for a few minutes. People seem to have some crazy idea that we are dating. Fleur answers with smiles and charming doublespeak.

"Funny as ever. Let's get this nonsense over with."

Not that it would surprise anyone, all the reporters are curious about what happened to the Durmstrang ship. I stick to the basic facts. Fleur and I were on the ship as part of a friendly bet. We left the ship. The Poltergeist attacked us. I held it in check while Fleur summoned help, and help arrived in the form of the Hogwarts ghosts, who destroyed it. The damage caused to the vessel was a result of the destruction of the Geist.

"Yes, but Mr. Potter, how does one keep a Poltergeist in check?" Rita asks, in her nonchalant manner.

"That would be through the use of magic, Rita."

"Care to be more specific?"

"Not particularly. Next question. You, sir."

"How about what you were doing in the Forbidden Forest with the French Foreign Minister's daughter?" This comes from the thickly accented voice of one of the Eastern European papers. Rita must have just found her soul mate.

"She was upset because of events on the boat. I followed to make certain she was okay."

"Why was she upset?"

"You'd have to take that up with her, sir. Next question, Miss Clearwater."

"Are you disappointed that another task has come, and because of outside influences, you were unable to give your best performance?"

"In some ways, yes, but I'm still in the overall lead. I'll just have to make certain I'm in peak condition for the next round of dueling. Next question, you sir."

"A two-part question, Mr. Potter—any comment on the sacking of Severus Snape?"

I smile, "Matters of staffing are really the Headmaster's area, but in this instance, I will say that poor performances catch up with us all, and that it was high time the man was removed and replaced with someone capable of teaching. I am of the opinion that Hogwarts is better off without him, but don't take my word for it. Take an informal survey of some of my classmates and you'll be surprised. Your second part, sir?"

"Any comment on his hiring by Headmaster Igor Karkaroff as an instructor?"

"Nothing printable, I assure you. Let me see if I can come up with something that is. It's coming to me...Okay, Headmaster Karkaroff just lost the thing used to terrorize his students, so he was in need of a replacement. Snape was all he could find on such short notice." My eyes lock with Krum's. He's already completed his interview and is doing individual "damage control" to try and maintain his marketable image.

I call on the French reporter and he asks, "Miss Delacour would neither confirm nor deny that you and she have struck up a relationship. You were seen speaking with both her and her father. Would you care to clarify?"

"I have the utmost respect for Fleur as a competitor and a friend. Both of us respect each other's privacy and hope that the press will as well. It was a great honor to meet Minister Delacour and have a brief conversation."

"You're not answering the question. What did you and the Minister talk about?"

"We spoke about the tournament and he said that he'd be watching me with interest." A few cameras go off and I hope my grin isn't too telling.

And so it goes—another ten minutes of them trying to weasel more details out of me, and my evasive answers. Finally, I grow bored and give the last question to Rita.

"What do you think of your chances in the rest of the tournament? What are your predictions for the next round of dueling?"

I almost answer with "pain" based off of some American boxing movie that Dudley went spare over. Instead, I say, "We've all improved over the last few months. I think it will be exciting. As for my chances, it doesn't hurt to have a lead at the moment. It's going to come down to the final event, which should make everyone happy."

Heading out of the tent Hat grumbles, "They seem interested in you and Delacour. Anything to that, HJ?"

"Nothing worth mentioning in this crowd."

Outside of the tent, I see Fleur waiting in the distance chatting with some of her friends and well-wishers, and Hermione and Ron lurking close by. However, two others are clearly waiting for me—a scared-looking Neville and his grandmother.

"Tough break out there, Harry." Ron's still a bit skittish around the Hat's golem body. I can't really fault him for that.

"Ron, that's not very nice!" Hermione says.

"Huh?" He says, before realizing. "Oh yeah, I guess that didn't come out the way I meant it."

"No worries, Ron. It was a tough break."

"We've got some good seats saved, Harry. Are you going to come watch the match with us in the stands?" Ron asks.

"No, I've had a long night and need to go somewhere quiet and get some rest. Tell me about it later. Record some of it on your Omnis if the action gets real good, or we can watch it in the Pensieve later."

"Fair enough. Looks like warm-ups are almost over and they'll be starting soon. C'mon, Hermione!"

He drags off Granger, who simply mouths "Common Room" at me once more. There's only one more thing separating me from going somewhere else with Fleur. Let's see how quick I can knock this one out.

"Good day, Madame Longbottom." I've been getting a refresher course in manners all day. I might as well give them a try.

"Don't you 'good day' me, young man. I want a word with you." The crone starts after me in a stern voice. She's going for the old "throw her weight around and wait for me to cave" technique. I'm not sure it would even work with Harry, much with less with HJ.

"Very well, Madame. What would you like to discuss?" I give her unflappable civility and try to make Albus proud—assuming, of course, I can keep it up.

"You will cease meddling in Longbottom family affairs this very instant!"

I try to look thoughtful. "Meddling? I'm afraid you have me at a disadvantage. If you're referring to my agreement with St. Mungo's, I prefer to see it as one friend helping another out of respect for the long friendship shared between them and their respective families. Do you see it differently?"

"It is a family matter and your interference is not wanted."

"Interference implies that something is being done. Since nothing has been done, how can you say I am interfering?"

"I've had enough of your cheek!" Clearly, my strategy is wearing her down.

"Neville, why don't you take a walk over there while she and I have a little chat?"

The poor kid hesitates, but then walks off a few dozen paces. I take that opportunity to drop Snape's famous Muffliato on us. "You were saying, Madame?"

"You will owl St. Mungo's and stop this foolishness, or so help me, I will drag you there myself!"

"Neville believes his mother is improving. Speaking as a son who knows that his mother will never get better, I can say that I'll support his cause with the contents of my trust vault, and upon reaching my majority, my family vaults. If he never repays me, I won't lose any sleep. His friendship is worth far more than that."

Clearly flustered, Augusta whispers, "I do not approve!"

"I'll persevere somehow." A hint of sarcasm creeps into my voice.

"Don't take that tone with me, young man."

I gesture back to the press tent. "I've got a better idea. How about we go back in there and discuss it in full view of the reporters? I'll be happy to tell them how I'm helping a friend get treatment for his mother against your wishes. Skeeter lives for stories like this. Put my name into the mix and by the tomorrow night, you could be the most hated woman in all of England."

Augusta's doesn't like the way she's being talked to—no big shock there. "Now, listen here, Harry Potter. I won't stand for such behavior."

"Then, may I conjure you a chair?"

"Insolent child!"

Manners clearly are a waste at this point. I nod to Hat and that's all the encouragement it needs. "What in the hell is that damn thing on your head, woman? A vulture for a Hat? Does it come to life when you die, to clean up the mess left behind?"

"I beg your pardon!"

"As well you should. I remember you, Augusta Sinclair. Back then you were a weak-minded fool little Slytherin wanting the world to do whatever you say. Now, you're just one addled old witch, clinging to what power you married into."

"What have you done to the Sorting Hat?" She accuses me. "This is a precious artifact and you have done something to it! I will be taking this to the Board of Governors, I will. They will know of this!"

Honestly, I'm shocked that people haven't accused me of this before.

"I am as Godric made me, you ignorant hag. Go ahead and speak with them." Hat mocks her. "That collection of useless fossils! They know me for what I am."

I try to be diplomatic. "Hat, you're not really helping here. Madame, you won't win against me. If you attempt to go against me publicly, it will only result in your reputation being ruined. I'd rather not do that, but only out of respect for your grandson."

"I don't think you're a good influence on Neville. I may have to reconsider where I send Neville for his schooling next year." She offers a not-so-veiled threat in retaliation.

"I could be polite at this point and say something like 'there would be consequences,' but the simple truth is that I would ruin you, completely and utterly. I also couldn't see you sending him too far away from your control, which leads me to believe you're bluffing. Finally, if his mother actually be recovering, and I pray that she is, she will be the one controlling his future."

She walks away abruptly and commands Neville to his side. I give him a nod letting him know that I've won this round.

I doubt the battle is over, though.

Breaking away from Hat, I meet up with Fleur.

"What did the witch want? You appear to have angered her."

"I involved myself in something I consider honorable. She chooses not to see it that way."

My girlfriend sighs. "You have an incredible gift for making people want to harm you, Harry. There is a saying in my family. 'The easiest way to win a fight is to not have enemies.' Perhaps I could teach you this."

"Maybe later. How about we go back to the castle and find a place to relax?"

A few days later, I'm in the infirmary—back at "work," rather than being a patient. Fleur went to France to check up on Aimee and engage in frivolous girl talk—the rumors that I am her latest boy-toy persist. When she comes back, we're going to this dinner at the French embassy.

I might have tipped off Penny that she should be there.

Ironically, Snape is still teaching in the dungeons. Only this time, he's wearing Durmstrang robes and has a "guest" instructor office. Old Horace Slughorn has accepted Dumbledore's offer and will be starting on Monday. Sadly, it's back to Potions class for me, but I can probably score some serious points by bringing Fleur to a "Slug Club" meeting.

Hermione is almost there with her Occlumency. She was briefly able to hold me out. Soon, I will have to let both her and Fleur in on my greatest secret. Just like Monsieur Pronghorn, I don't want to keep this one from Fleur very long, and I know that she already has some training in the mental disciplines.

I said it before: secrets destroyed James and Lily Potter. It's why I hate them so.

Lost in my thoughts, I almost swat the insect on my hand until I realize that it is my "spyfly" coming in from the proverbial cold and all that rot.

"Poppy, there's nothing going on here. Do you mind if I go back to my dorm for a few hours?"

The nurse looks up from the book she is reading. "Go ahead, Harry. I'll summon you with an elf if needed."

I move quickly back to the dorms and head up to my room. The twins are keeping away from me so far. For their sake, I hope that continues. Once safe behind my ward line, I slip spyfly up to my ear and start listening for anything useful. I hear people hurriedly removing artifacts from his office during the "abandon ship" period. The next thing recorded is what can only be a Howler, spoken in Polish, and Karkaroff muttering.

Snape enters and immediately the buzzing of the Muffliato starts. I listen anyway, trying to catch a stray word, but it's next to impossible. I try a few charms to clear it up, but nothing works.

Frustrated, I pick up the mirror and call for Padfoot. He looks a bit weary when he answers.

"Oi, Blackie. How are things?"

"The negotiations with the Giants didn't go as well as hoped. They'll be neutral for now, but it will only last until they get a better offer."

I'm impressed. "They're willing to deal with us. That's a lot better than we had any right to expect."

He scoffs in reply and tilts his head in mock arrogance. "I'm Sirius Black. Did you expect anything less? I've heard you've been busy. The papers around here are all twittering over you and Delacour. Any truth to the rumors?"

"As a matter of fact, yes."

"Well done then, HJ! I'm proud of you! Shagged her yet?"

I roll my eyes, "Just when I thought you'd developed some couth. The answer is no. I'm playing it by ear right now."

"There are better things to play with on her than her ear, Potter. Hey, I'm just saying!"

"Don't ever change. Hey, I need some inspiration. More specifically, I need a way to beat the Muffliato charm. Ask Remus if he has any ideas."

"I'm here as well, Harry," Lupin answers. I give them the background on the spyfly and what I need, and we debate ways of cracking a privacy ward. I try casting a Muffliato of my own, and try to listen through it with no luck.

Ultimately, the werewolf makes a good suggestion. "Harry, the magic blocks your ability to perceive the words, but some of the conversation may still be imprinted on your consciousness. Listen to it again and then withdraw the memory and use your Pensieve."

That's how I find myself standing next to ... myself, and listening to the phantom spyfly in my memory's hands. Its tough work; reminds me of one of the first few days after I got back to the Dursleys' after my second year, and Dudley got caught watching the after-hours girly movies on the late-night channels. Petunia blocked his TV upstairs from getting those stations, and so he tried watching through the static, trying to see a glimpse of someone's naughty bits. It was all rather sad.

This, however, has some potential. I am actually hearing a few words.

"...pay...this..."

"Relax Snape...unfolding...position...up..."

"..."

"..."

"...teaching...Slughorn...fossil...blow..."

"...talk about..."

"..."

"...soon ... possible... contacted by Pettigrew..."

"..."

Author's Notes – Visit my profile for the latest information on my original works. Thank you all for reading and reviewing. Next chapter in about 2 weeks.

Disclaimer – Nothing but fanfiction

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Chapter 22 – Head Games

“I agree that this doesn’t bode well, Harry. However, your methodology for defeating the privacy wards is spotty at best. Your mind could be hearing precisely what you want it to hear.”

I shake my head and continue to pet Fawkes. “And I plucked Pettigrew’s name out of my head at this particular instant in time? That seems pretty unlikely. They’re hiding something! Do we wait for the usual end of the year surprise, or are we going to be proactive about this? I think you know how I feel.”

Dumbledore smiles at me and I can feel my blood boiling. “We will take precautions, Harry. Inside this castle, all the elves—except, of course, your free elf, all the paintings, and the ghosts are loyal to me by virtue of my position. I have been somewhat lax in asserting this authority. Outside, we cannot control what Headmaster Karkaroff and our former professor are up to, although I will remind you that you forced this matter with Severus.”

“If Voldemort is fool enough to believe that Snape would be useful as a spy inside of Hogwarts, after you defended him in front of the Wizengamot, he’s addled, and our job will be that much easier.”

“True, but you removed his opportunity to side with us.”

“Do you really want to go there, Headmaster? Best I can tell, he was all for Harry’s death. It was only the debt owed to James and the fact he was chasing after my ... after James’s wife that he came running to you.”

“And we all know that debt fell to you.”

In a battle of wits, I am unlikely to beat this man. If I let this go on enough, he'll probably trick me into saying something like how much we need Snape, and then I'll want to go kill myself. Best not to let that happen.

"I'd rather he falter during an attack and be forced to save me, rather than having him as a reluctant ally. He doesn't owe anything to Moody, Shacklebolt, or any of the rest. He's a toxin in our midst. The sooner he leaves the better off we all are."

He leans forward and rubs his beard between his thumb and forefinger. "There is little to be gained in beating this particular dead horse. Choices have been made, let us move to the matter at hand. You wish to be proactive, Harry. What would you have me do? We cannot control their comings and goings. The ship is beached, and will take at least two months to be seaworthy again."

"We could work with the Merfolk and place runic mines in the Great Lake. If Karkaroff tries to make a quick run of it, we can seal off his exit route."

"And suppose the Giant Squid decides these baubles are its newest playthings?"

"We could keep them inert and keyed to either you or me." I can already tell he isn't interested in the idea.

"Possible, but I cannot foresee Karkaroff fleeing without hostages. Would you be so keen to activate those mines if Miss Granger, Mister Weasley, or Miss Delacour were onboard as captives, bound and without their wands? History has shown that Tom's followers do not let notions of collateral damage hinder their actions and I do not wish to sink to their level. Besides, he only has to reach the middle of the lake before he can Apparate or Portkey away."

"Yeah, I considered that much as well. Several Golems buried in the sand at the beach might also do the trick."

"A rather pricey option, Harry. I can think of better uses for our resources, such as working to improve our relations with the

Centaurs in the forest, and putting our finest foot forward when in view of the public eye. I hear you've been invited to a dinner at the French Embassy."

"Word travels fast."

"There is a reason the Hogwarts gossip network is legendary. As for your plans, I salute your ingenuity, Harry. You obviously came up with them last night on short notice. It is the kind of thinking we will need moving forward. Take your time and give me better solutions that you, Sirius, and Remus all agree on and I will do my best to enact them. You are brash and powerful, Harry, and possess a distinct view of what needs to be done. Use your other allies as a sounding board to see what you do not."

I hesitate before answering. "That sounds reasonable enough. What are you up to, then?"

"Courting allies, as usual. One beneficial side affect to all this calamity we have experienced this year is that my colleagues abroad are more receptive to the possibility that the Dark Lord is trying to return."

"Perhaps it's time to restart the failed Hogwarts Dueling Club?"

"Yet another good idea, Harry. Though it is most assuredly too late for it this year, I think the popularity of the dueling contests during the tournament will open the minds of the Board of Governors to allow this next term. Naturally, if Harry Potter were to be involved in this club in a meaningful way, I expect membership in such a club would be valued."

A sinking feeling comes over me. "I walked right into that, didn't I?"

"Indeed you did, my boy." He says with a cheeky smile. "Call it another lesson in considering the ramifications of not thinking your ideas through before you give them voice. I'll bring it up at the next staff meeting and see which Professor would be interested in helping you sponsor the dueling club. I daresay that whoever it is, they might be interested in picking up a few pointers from you, as well."

I should have kept him in the dark about me—seriously.

“Well, except for that patch of blackened earth that gives me the shivers, this isn’t such a bad place. Honestly, I think we should just go ahead and pull that bush. Nothing short of a miracle can save it.” Hannah Abbott says aloud, more to her ‘date’ Neville than to the rest of us.

It probably wasn’t exactly what she expected when Neville asked her if she wanted to spend the day with him and have a picnic later with me and Fleur. Still, she’s being a good sport, and I know she’s equally as fascinated by Herbology as he is.

Neville’s been looking for a way to help me ever since I agreed to pay for his mum’s treatment. I definitely don’t want to let him know how deeply I’m really involved in that anytime soon. Fleur’s not-so secret grotto is a good place to let him start. Most of the flora is damaged and in need of professional care. Plants aren’t really my field of expertise. Fleur isn’t terribly bad at the subject, but she isn’t particularly good, either.

Besides, we have cleansing rituals to get to, and they aren’t exactly a walk in the park either.

“Find anything useful, ladies?” I ask Hermione and Ginny. As I get closer, they look panicked and embarrassed. The cover of my anybook, which is linked to a book of rituals in the Potter vault, gets slammed shut. I have a good idea why. There are several rituals with rather explicit diagrams. Ron, if he were here, probably would be trying to take notes. I asked him if he wanted to get up early on a weekend and go perform a cleansing ritual. His response was to throw a rather crude gesture in my direction and burrow under his pillow.

“Not really. There was a really good one in there, but we don’t have the dragon to purify the soil with flaming breath. And some of the others...”

Fleur looks up from the candles she's lighting. "If they are the ones that I am thinking of, I doubt that Harry or I meet the criteria."

Many of these rituals start with a base element of purity—fire, earth, air, or water. Some of them add a somewhat interesting twist on things.

I laugh at the redness of their faces. "Most of those will only work if one or both of the participants in the ritual are virgins. Let's stick with the one we're using now and see how well it works."

Trust me, I'm all for a little rain-soaked afternoon tryst, but warming charms would likely interfere with the magic and it isn't really all that warm out. Late April or early May—at the very least—for that kind of frolicking, thank you very much.

Hermione, embarrassed, stammers for a moment before what I just said hits her. She looks at me with brow furrowed so hard that it must be giving her a headache. "What about what you said in the Common Room the other night?"

I clear my throat and look over at Neville and Hannah, who are pretending—albeit poorly—not to be listening to this fascinating-but-private conversation.

"No, we haven't," I say, in the vaguest terms possible. "It was someone else."

"Ohmigod." Hermione shoots a glance at Ginny. "No wonder Fred and George hate you!"

"This is all news to me," Ginny says, sounding slightly dejected. She's finally warming up to the idea that I'm not available.

"No it wasn't Ginny, or Katie Bell either, if that's what you're thinking. It's a good thing that there are privacy wards on this grotto." I'm half annoyed and half amused at Hermione. "Just let it go. Quite frankly, it isn't anyone's business."

A quick glance at Fleur ascertains her opinion of things. The expression on her face clearly says, "These are your friends, Harry Potter. It wasn't my idea to let them help."

"Help" is indeed a four letter word. I could probably summon Dobby out here and make things even worse.

"Oh sorry, Harry. I didn't mean to pry." She looks both hurt and embarrassed. Great, she's the one butting in to my personal life, and somehow I'm the bad guy for telling her it's none of her bloody business.

"I'm a virgin, Harry," Neville offers, trying to be helpful Perhaps hopeful is a better word.

"And you're likely to stay one for the foreseeable future," Hannah says, cutting in rather forcefully.

"I'm afraid you're not my type either, Neville, but thanks for telling me." Much needed laughter ensues.

I take this time to get the owl feathers out of the bag to represent the air in the ceremony and hand them to Fleur. She starts inscribing runes into them using ink made from fresh water collected from a nearby stream. Hermione, Ginny, and I begin drawing runes at the edge of the blackened earth. Odds are that this won't completely work, but it should dramatically reduce the size of the cursed area.

Eventually, the ten feathers ring the blackened area and the runes scribbled in the dirt are deemed to be correct. Fleur walks slowly counter-clockwise and begins her chant, as I begin lighting the feathers on fire with the tip of my wand. Behind each feather is a bucket of freshly tilled earth from Hagrid's garden. Once the feathers are ash, the earth is mixed with what remains and that dirt is used to cover affected area.

Nothing too tricky and nothing that requires the sacrifice of someone's virginity—only time and patience and delicate rune work on Fleur's part.

Just as I expected, the tainted land is halved in size. Hannah, Neville, Ginny, and Hermione team up to remove eight of the ten damaged bushes and are now debating what should be replanted in their place. Fleur's only stipulation, delivered with a teasing wink, is that the replacements be something with edible berries.

I move up alongside her as she stares into the murky pool of water. "Is it clearer?"

"Somewhat. I suspect that we still have our work cut out for us," she replies, stirring the surface of the water idly with her Veela hair wand. "The hour is almost up, so we need to leave and let the grotto return to its holding place. Do you wish to continue tomorrow, or do you want to save your strength for the dinner at the Embassy?"

"What do you recommend?" I defer to her.

"We should wait. You will need to be rested and on your best behavior with my mother. Plus, wherever you go, mayhem and chaos often follow." she says with a note of pragmatism.

"I'd deny it, but we both know it's true. Any advice would be greatly appreciated. I'm guessing Gabrielle will be no end of trouble."

She nods sagely, and says as she stands up, "If I could convince Mother to give her a Sleeping Draught, I would try. Many of those that try to date me try to ingratiate themselves to my sister in the hopes that it is something I would find attractive in a boyfriend. I love my sister dearly, but she is a menace. Do not feel that you need to give her special attention on my behalf. Other than that, be yourself. Be Harry Potter—you have faced Dragons, Dementors, and Dark Wizards. Mere aristocrats should be no cause for alarm."

The mischievous smile on her face leads me to believe that I'm walking into yet another trap.

"You look very nice, Harry Potter," Fleur comments, as she meets me at the gate. Several of her classmates from Beauxbatons are also

going on this little trip. There are a couple of other Hogwarts students and a pair of Durmstrang students as well.

I kiss the back of her hand. "You clean up nicely as well, Fleur." It's a joke, she's simply stunning. She could be dressed in Dudley's clothes...ugh, bad image. Let's forget about that! She could be dressed in just about anything and still be a knockout. This evening she's using a light green dress, instead of the dress she wore to the Yule Ball.

I actually went away from the bottle green robes Molly bought for me and ordered some others from Gladrags. They work with her dress slightly better, and have the added benefit of making me look older. Of course, I've added on about nine months, courtesy of the aging potion up in my room that I finally broke down and brewed. Harry Potter at fifteen doesn't look that much different than fourteen, but it blends into my look much better, for at least the next eight hours.

The fact that I brought new robes isn't lost on my date. She rubs the fabric around my wrist between her thumb and forefinger. "Soft. Very comfortable, I'd imagine. Not wearing your Order of Merlin?"

"No, seemed too garish. Besides, I suspect that your parents care little for English awards."

She laughs, and allows me to escort her down the path to Hogsmeade, where our group will use the Floo at Madame Rosemerta's to travel to London. Madame Maxim leads the way. I recall her dancing with Hagrid at the Yule Ball, but he's nowhere to be found this evening. I'll have to ask the big guy where he thinks they are headed. She's refined and he's been known to refine his own whiskey.

Inside the Three Broomsticks, I give a brief nod to Kingsley and who must be Tonks playing an 'Ebony Goddess,' probably just to yank her partner's chain. I'm slightly biased, but there is something to the debate about which is hotter—the Veela, or the Metamorph. Shackbolt drops some coins on the table and heads in front to use the Floo, as Maxim is sorting us out for our trip to the French Embassy. It would take some seriously ridiculous magic to redirect a

Floo, but we all think that's what happened to Dorcas Meadows and the two bodyguards she was traveling with in the last war, and Dumbledore obviously isn't taking any chances this time.

There's a joke to be made about Tonks bringing up the rear, but it will have to wait for another day. It seems wasted without Hat around.

The Headmistress of Beauxbatons has to go to one knee to enter the Floo. I notice how close her hand is to her wand, and wonder exactly how much Albus has told her. I go next and Fleur follows.

If Madame Maxime expected to be assaulted, it probably wasn't by me flailing my way out of the exit fireplace. I bounce off where she is standing and trip to the ground. She reaches down and hauls me to my feet while using her wand to clear the ashes from her dress.

"You do not travel well, Mister Potter," the giantess says.

"Never have, never will, I suspect. I make up for it with charm."

"You should try holding a glass of water in your hand during transit."

"Just so I can make more of a spectacle when I exit?" I ask with a sarcastic grin.

"No, with your concentration fixed on the glass and not on your feet, you may have a better trip. I've known many people who have used that technique to help make Floo travel a better experience."

"Well that makes sense. Thank you. I'll give it a try sometime." Naturally, as I am saying this, Fleur exits as if she has simply walked from one room to the next—the very picture of grace—and immediately vanishes the dust particles clinging to her form.

I can still beat her in a duel. That's got to count for something.

Cleaning myself off, I join Fleur and she escorts me through the entranceway of the French Embassy.

“I have noticed that you look like you do in the Pensieve—somewhat older,” she says as I take her arm.

“Really?” Next time I go into mine, I’ll have to pick a memory with a mirror in it. I’ve heard that a person’s self image defines how they appear in a Pensieve, but had never really given it much thought. My ‘self-image’ must be a couple of years older.

We wait at the doorway to the embassy’s great hall to be announced. I take Fleur’s white gloved hand in mine.

“Fleur Delacour of the House of Delacour and her escort, Harry Potter of the House of Potter.”

I weather the near blinding glare of cameras going off as we descend the stairs. I’m guessing the pictures will make me look like I’m under the influence of a stinging hex. Fleur immediately leads me to her parents, Gabrielle, and the actual French ambassador, who is a second or third cousin. I manage to spot Penny with Ollie, who is doing double duty as her date and photographer—I’ll have to make sure to tell him how whipped he is.

I kiss the back of Madame Delacour’s hand and dust off my French. “It is a pleasure to meet you, Madame.”

“And you as well, Harry Potter. I look forward to speaking with you at great length.”

“As do I, Madame. Minister, Ambassador—good evening to you both.” I execute a quick bow to them both and accept their handshakes, making certain that I’m following proper protocol as even more cameras go off. Some are directed at our group and others at those being announced after us. Honestly, it’s like being at a disco or something with all the flashes of light.

“We meet again, Harry Potter. I congratulate you. You’ve survived over a week of my daughter’s affection. That in itself is a remarkable achievement.”

“Papa!” Fleur protests. It’s obvious he can push her buttons when it humors him.

“She is a remarkable witch and a credit to both her family and her country,” I reply working the situation to my advantage. “Hello, Gabrielle. It is good to see you again.” I bow to the bane of my girlfriend’s existence and she smiles and curtsies.

“You’re much younger than Fleur’s usual boyfriends,” she says with the blunt honesty that only a preteen has.

“Gabrielle!” her sister admonishes Gabrielle, clearly not enjoying the awkward moment.

I’m just happy that it’s not me they’re having a go at. I stick to being gracious. “Your sister sees something in me that she likes. For that, I am grateful.”

“She still beat you in that duel.” Gabby shifts tactics and tries to rile me up.

“Yes, but there is always the rematch coming up. I’m looking forward to it.”

The question and answer session goes on for a few more minutes. I sense that I’m being used as a method of needling Fleur. Even the ambassador gets in a few good ones. It frustrates me, but I do my best to remain the model of English stoicism.

“How interesting,” Madame Delacour comments. “After my conversation with Rochelle Beaucourt, I expected someone a bit less refined. What a pleasant surprise.”

I don’t pretend to understand the dynamics between the Beaucourts and Delacours. Politically, they are enemies, but socially they seem like friends (with an emphasis on seems that is). Madame Delacour is much older than I expected, but her Veela charm is there, regardless.

“I’m afraid Madame Beaucourt caught me at a very bad moment, and we got off on the wrong foot. Do you have news about Aimee’s recovery?”

“The healing goes slowly, but progress is happening. The doctors expect she will be able to speak soon.”

Smiling, I say, “That’s good to hear. I don’t mean to be rude, but I should really go and pay my respects to Minister Fudge. Would you care to accompany me, Fleur?”

She nods and we make our way towards Fudge and his circle of social followers. “They were enjoying themselves, weren’t they?”

Fleur sighs and answers, “Yes, they’re looking for cracks in your armor. So far, you are performing admirably.”

“Perform makes me sound like some kind of actor. I’m wounded, Fleur. I am a deep and complex person quite capable in matters of diplomacy.”

Her eyes roll at my fake sincerity. “Until you need to destroy something, Harry.”

“For tonight, I will do my best not to resort to violence, but if violence is required, I’ll be polite about it.”

Fudge is entertaining his group recounting some humorous occurrences at the last meeting of the Wizengamot. It’s the kind of stuff you’d have to be present for and probably English—to enjoy.

Midway through the story about a maintenance dispute at the Ministry of Magic, he spots me, or at least Fleur. “Harry Potter! Good to see you!”

“And you as well, Minister. I hope all is well.”

“Yes, yes, dear boy. Come stand next to me for a moment. We should get a quick picture for the society papers. Bring your lovely

date as well. I haven't had the pleasure of being formally introduced, but surely all of Britain knows about Fleur Delacour."

We squeeze in next to Fudge and his ego. I'll be amazed if they get us all in the shot. After exchanging a few pleasantries with him, the chime sounds mercifully and we head to our tables for dinner.

Except we're sitting with Fleur's parents, so perhaps mercifully isn't the correct word. I pull the chair out for Fleur like a proper gentleman and then take my seat. Funny, James Potter used to love this rubbish, but I'm more irritated than anything else.

"My husband tells me that during your battle with this Poltergeist, you practically destroyed the sanctuary I made for Fleur."

Yeah, this is going to be a long night, so I parry with a compliment. "There was considerable damage, but it will be made whole again. I learned a long time ago that with magic, anything is possible. You do very nice work. The amulet is a complex weaving of charms and transfigurations."

Her mother smiles at me and says, "When I first met my husband, he found me enchanting in both the literal and figurative aspects of the word. So, you live with Muggles, dear. Tell me what that is like."

I'm sorely tempted to ask if she is any relation to Lucius Malfoy, but I honestly don't want to know the answer. "My relatives dislike magic or anything to do with it. It's just a place to live."

The questioning continues as our salad plates vanish and are replaced with soup bowls. "And will you be living there this summer or will you be following my daughter on the racing circuit?"

I smile at the fuming Fleur, "That remains to be seen. Things are still very early. I am more concerned about right now rather than worrying about months from now."

"Dear—," the Minister comes to my rescue, "let the boy eat his meal. You can dissect him after dinner at your leisure."

Okay, maybe that's not a rescue, per se—more like a stay of execution, but I'll take it. The meal is excellent. So far, I can tell that Fleur's father is somewhat in my favor, but I sense a distinctly hostile vibe coming from her mother.

Fleur tries to change the subject by asking about family friends back in France. She has only moderate success. I search my mind and look for some slight that's occurred, but can't come up with anything that I've done wrong so far.

Maybe she just doesn't like the English. I should introduce her to the Sorting Hat. They'd hit it off.

Madame Delacour intervenes once again, saying, "Tell me, Harry, what is your impression of Delores Umbridge's stance on Dark Creatures?"

"I know she is one of Minister Fudge's undersecretaries, but I'm afraid I do not know her positions."

Her husband answers rather abruptly. "She introduced the Dark Creature Registration and Control Act in your Wizengamot just last week."

"My apologies, Minster. You've caught me somewhat unprepared. With everything going on at Hogwarts, I haven't been able to follow political matters. From the sound of it, the legislation sounds oppressive." I sense his wife baited a trap, I took the bait, and her husband pounced.

"A word of advice young man – not all battles are fought with wands. You would do well to remember that and pay attention to the world around you."

Bugger, I seem to be losing ground with the father as well. I'd break out some of JP's famed wit and charm, but it doesn't seem like I should bother.

"Could you explain the legislation to me, Father?" Fleur asks.

If he is surprised about his eldest daughter turning the tables only the quiver an eyebrow betrays it. "It is more drivel by the English to further discriminate against Veela, Werewolves, and Vampires. Were it enacted, I would be forced to acquire a permit for your mother's presence in England, as she is half-Veela."

"What about Gabrielle and me?"

"I do not believe so."

This is troubling. It sounds like some people in the Fudge administration are looking to capitalize on the undercurrents of fear out there. "Not the Goblins, then."

"Of course the Goblin nation is exempted," he answers my comment dismissively.

I can't seem to make a point with these people. Instead, I try to concentrate on the dessert that just appeared in front of me.

Forty-five minutes later the meal is over, the dance floor is clear, and I happen to have a perturbed French witch in my arms.

"Two years ago, one of my supposed boyfriends attempted to ensnare me with love potions. He was from a well-connected family, and we saw him three months after our break-up. My parents treated him with more courtesy and respect than they afforded to you! I am truly sorry, Harry."

"I make lousy first impressions." I brush it off. "Besides, there's only one Delacour with an opinion I care about."

Her scowl slips into a brief smile. "You should say more things like that to me."

"I'll try." The waltz ends and I feel a tap on my shoulder. Her father is cutting in. Madame Delacour has already left the dance floor. This leaves me without a partner for a brief moment.

“Fancy a turn, Harry?” A familiar and welcome voice asks. Her dress is a rather attractive red affair and the heels have her towering a good four inches over me.

“I’d be delighted, Miss Clearwater. You look beautiful this evening. I see you’ve finally found Ollie some gainful employment.”

She laughs and says, “I’m positively dreading what his photos will look like. Hopefully, one or two will be salvageable. You looked uncomfortable during dinner.”

“I don’t think the Delacours like me. That’s not for print by the way.”

“Wouldn’t dream of it, Harry. You’d be surprised how nervous Ollie was meeting Mum and Dad.”

“How’d that go?” Considering we both know her ‘real’ dad is a Death Eater in Azkaban, I let that slide.

“He was a bloody awful wreck. I was tempted to conjure a Quaffle and let my parents take turns throwing it at him. In the hoops he can hold his own, but he might as well have been Confunded. It was almost cute—almost.”

Another touch on my shoulder and I spin expecting to see Oliver Wood. Instead, there is a middle-aged French witch in nice robes standing eye to eye with me.

“Mr. Potter, my name is Olivia and I am Chief of Security for the embassy. Would you please come with me?”

“Is there a problem?”

“That remains to be seen.”

I nod to a suddenly anxious Penny, and follow the witch back through the kitchen to the servant entrance. Kingsley Shacklebolt falls into step beside us as we arrive at the back door.

“A Muggle under a Compulsion dropped this off. I have some of my people questioning her right now. After we’re done, we’ll turn her over to your Aurors for processing and Obliviation. She in a bit of a state as you English say—can’t even tell us her name. Until we cast our spells on it, it was free of residual magic.”

I look at the box on the table. It has a Clearview Charm on it already. I ignore the red and gold bow on top with my name on a tag and instead look at the contents. Suddenly, I’m regretting the oysters with dinner, I’m fighting the urge to vomit. Lifeless eyes stare back at me. There’s a look of horror frozen on the young man’s face. The bottom of the box is saturated with blood.

“Is it one of your classmates?” Shacklebolt asks.

“A long time ago, yes, but he’s not magical. His name is ... was Piers Polkiss. He was a Muggle living in my relatives’ neighborhood, a friend of my cousin. The woman who brought the box, was she a brunette in her late forties? Large glasses?”

“Yes.”

“It’s his mum, Dottie Polkiss.”

The Chief of Security sighs, “At least it was a Muggle. There won’t be any uproar over this, and the paperwork will be minimal. Mr. Shacklebolt, I will leave this in your hands since the crime obviously occurred off the property of the embassy. It plainly falls under your jurisdiction. If you’ll excuse me, I need to inform my superiors.”

I watch the French witch walk away, washing her hands of the situation. It’s a sad truth. Olivia and most of the people dancing the night away inside could care less about a Muggle boy’s head in a box. Up until fifteen years ago, you could buy them openly from stands in Knockturn Alley. They’re probably still there, if you look hard enough and wave a coin or two around.

Kingsley removes the lid and looks inside. “Looks like the Black family crest is carved into the top of the skull—a crude attempt to

frame Sirius.” He floats the head out of the box and looks at the fatal blow. “Boy wasn’t killed by magic. A knife or sword did this.”

“He wasn’t worth wasting magic on. It’s a message from Pettigrew and his master. They know where my relatives live. They’ll need some protection. I doubt Fudge’ll go for it, so it’s going to have to come through the Order.”

“Get back inside, Potter. I’ve got to get an Oblivator team over here to take care of this mess. Send Tonks out here to help, and then stay inside until we fetch you. Be prepared to leave thirty minutes earlier than we planned.”

I can’t hear the music through the privacy wards. I’m upstairs in the Ambassador’s office. There’s nothing like getting a bloody Muggle head as a gag gift to kill the mood. The Ambassador, the Minister, his wife, and my date are also here with me. They’ve just gotten an explanation about the events from a few minutes ago.

“This is most unsettling, Mr. Potter,” the Minister says.

“I agree.” I didn’t really care for Piers, but hell, the kid didn’t deserve that.

Fleur’s mother, quiet up until now speaks, “Your patron, Monsieur Dumbledore, he believes this Dark Lord of yours is planning to return. He makes a considerable stir in front of the ICW. What say you to this, Harry Potter?”

I clench the armrests of my chair several times. “I have seen the wraith with my own eyes, Madame Delacour. Powerful magic keeps him from passing on. The fact that he’s out there is a heavy burden to the Headmaster and I’m not very happy about it either. One of his people put me in this tournament. I’m sure he gave the orders.”

“And should this wraith manage to return to human form?”

“Let’s hope that isn’t anytime soon, Milady.”

“Of course, Harry Potter. Still, you and any around you would be targets, would they not?”

I nod. There's little use in denying it.

“Now, let me give you a history lesson, Monsieur Potter, something my mother and I only rarely speak of. I was but a tiny child when Grindelwald's forces ravaged our Veela enclave in search of a relic we did not possess. When they realized we did not have what they sought, they showed us what barbarism wizards and witches are capable of.”

“Precisely what does that have to do with Harry, Mother?” Fleur asserts herself; strong will does run in the family.

“Do I have to spell it out for you, daughter? Either this boy and Dumbledore are delusional liars, or he is correct that their Lord Voldemort will return. If so, Harry Potter and all those around him are marked for death. I have nothing against you, Harry Potter, but my mother ended up burying her husband and my older sisters. I have no intentions of letting something like that happen to my family.”

I try to find my ‘inner Dumbledore’ and craft a solution to this. Unfortunately, all I have is my ‘inner Sorting Hat’ and what I'd like to say wouldn't be helpful.

Fleur shakes her head in frustration. “So this is what this is all about? This! You scare too easily, Mother.”

“Don't you take that tone with me!”

“I'm sorry. What tone would you like me to take?”

That's not really helpful either, but since it's not coming from me, it's pretty damn funny.

“Quit being an insufferable brat, Fleur. Your father and I have already discussed matters and we have decided. We do not approve of your dating Harry Potter. If it was not for this idiotic tournament, you would

already be back in France. We have decided that you can train for your events at our estate and we will transport you to Hogwarts for those events. This is for the best.”

Fleur is angry—very angry. “No. I am seventeen years old, Mother. I am capable of making my own decisions.”

Her father jumps in, probably because his wife’s whip told him to. “This is no broom race, Fleur! You will heed your mother.”

“What? Are you saying that I am not capable of looking after myself? Would a feeble witch be selected as a Triwizard Champion?”

“That’s not it.”

“Then what is it?” Damn! Look at her go!

“Tell them,” Madame Delacour instructs her husband.

“It is a matter of State, my dear.”

“State be damned! Tell her now, or I will!”

He pauses and considers his options. Turning to me, he says, “Very well. I consulted with our equivalent to the English Department of Mysteries. In France, we have some of the finest Arithmancers and Diviners in the world. Their predictions are remarkably accurate. The consensus is that, within a year your Dark Lord will return and war will soon follow. Are you prepared to face a Dark Lord that is more than just a wraith, Harry Potter?”

“I’ve beaten him before. I can do it again, as many times as it takes.” I give a short answer and try to keep my temper from getting the best of me.

“Harry,” Fleur says. “Please wait for me in the hallway. I will be out shortly.”

“I’ll stay if you need me.”

“No, this is something I must do for myself.”

I exit beyond the privacy wards and stare at the fine artwork lining the hallway. I suppress the urge to eavesdrop. Fleur will tell me what she wants to tell me.

Five minutes later Fleur emerges, face flushed, angry, and with tear streaks down her face. She takes a moment and casts a few charms that fix her makeup and soften her appearance.

“I wish to go back to Hogwarts now, Harry. Will you please escort me?”

“Just let me grab Tonks and we’ll leave. Are you okay?”

She gives me a sad look. “No, I am not. Perhaps tomorrow I will be.”

Tonks takes us back through a different Floo—the Hogshead’s. Dumbledore’s brother is there. He motions us into the back room and flips over a map of Hogsmeade that looks eerily like the Marauder’s Map. “The road’s clear up to the castle. I suggest you three hightail it on up there. Professor McGonagall will be waiting for you. I’ll monitor things from here and if you see red sparks coming from Hogsmeade, it means somebody is coming who shouldn’t be there. Now, go on and git!”

With that, Aberforth pushes us rudely out the back door and we’re off.

We head up the trail with wands drawn. Tonks is more than a little uneasy and I take point. She’s still an Auror trainee. It’s a long, silent ten minutes up the path to Hogwarts, but we make it without incident. McGonagall and Filch let us into the castle. It’s quiet after curfew.

“Do you want to go down to my workshop and talk?”

She nods and I lead her down there. Once inside, she wraps her arms around me and I hold her while she sobs. I let it go on for as long as she wants. She’ll talk when she’s ready—or not at all.

Eventually, she breaks away and I conjure a tissue for her. "Better now?"

"A little. I realized something tonight, Harry. My mother does not really love my father. She puts on a mask and acts, but she sought him after Beauxbatons. He was the most powerful wizard she could find. She courted him and she married on his terms. Only after his career was on the fast track did she give him children to ensure he would protect her for all time. I now know why she's always pushed me to be better and stronger than everyone else, because she was not strong enough to protect herself. Is it terrible, Harry, to look at your own mother and see weakness?"

Boy, she picked the wrong person to ask that to! Tears threaten to overflow from her eyes again as I say, "Parents are people, too. None of us are perfect. They just do the best they can."

My words are just stupid platitudes, but right now they're all I have, and hopefully they're enough for her.

"This is all very touching. So, are you two going to shag now? If so, I'd like to get a better angle to view it from," an all too familiar voice says. I look back at the Golem hidden in the shadows of the dark room.

The Sorting Hat steps out. "Maybe you shouldn't date, HJ. All your previous attempts seem to end up in tears or serious injury. Perhaps you are cursed."

"Riddle sent a Muggle's head to the party. It was one of Dudley's friends."

"Is that all?" It says in a mocking tone. "If that floating sack of Manticore shit had any real power right now, he would have sent a hundred or come himself. Instead he sends one head! Right now, he's weak. And you, Delacour, so you have issues with your mother. I'd cry if I could. There was a time in history where the Veela clans sold off their half-breeds and misfits to noblemen across Europe to support themselves. Why else would Lancelot be so willing to sell out his loyalty for Arthur's bed warmer?"

"I'm not really in the mood for a lecture right now, Hat. Neither is Fleur."

"I was in here, resting and minding my own business when the two of you came in. Perhaps I was in no mood to be disturbed. Did your mind ever consider that, or has too much blood already run down to your pecker?"

"Fine. We're leaving Hat." I haven't spent much time with it lately. Is it jealous of Fleur?

I pull her into the hallway and she leads me to what used to be her workshop. I lock the door and she casts the privacy wards.

"How do you stand such a thing?" she asks looking around the mostly empty room.

"Normally, it's not so bad to me. I think we just caught it on an off night."

"I get the feeling that it doesn't like me, Harry," she says lifting herself gracefully onto a workbench.

"I could say the same of your family. You didn't really care for me when we first met." I hop up beside her.

She brushes some hair away from her face. "You're not going to let me forget that, are you? My mother scares easily. My father can resist her to a point, but even so, he caters to her whims for fear that she will leave him. I am certain that he went to our Arithmancers on her urging."

"I'm sorry, but I wasn't terribly impressed by your Arithmancers. I've known that he's coming back since I was eleven. Do you want to talk about what happened after I left?"

"I made certain that she knew I would not cave into her demands. At first she threatened to withhold my access to family funds, but my success as a broom racer has left me comfortable. Then Mother

realized she had nothing but empty gestures. Then she tried bribery. The day I graduate, I could have departed on a round the world trip or started decorating my very own estate.”

“I’m flattered that you picked me.”

“Don’t be. This, what we have ... it may not even work out.”

“We should stop saying things like that before it becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy.”

She stops and looks at me. “You are right. I sense both of us are being too cautious. Finally, Mother said many hurtful things, which I would rather not repeat. As I said, I did this for me. Mother excels at—what do you call them? Ah yes, the guilt trip. It is as easy for her as Apparition. If war does break out, poor Gabrielle will be sequestered on the estate and given private tutoring until she is thirty.”

I let her rest her head on my shoulder, and try to keep myself from staring down her dress.

“Hat was right about my dates. They don’t seem to go so well.”

She chuckles and says, “You are a master of understatement, Harry.”

“Admit it, Hat. You’re jealous.”

“The fact you keep trying to assign human emotions to me only proves what a waste of James Potter’s sperm you are.”

“Don’t worry we’ll always be mates.”

As it launches into a string of vulgarities, I look around the Flamel estate. I’m definitely ‘ditching school’ in style. Dumbledore sent me here for the week. Fleur’s parents would appreciate the irony. I’m the one training in France.

"You seem to have hit a nerve there, Harry. You could always keep me company here, Hat," Sirius says, stuffing some egg into his mouth. With the full moon approaching, Lupin is sleeping in. Plus, I might have beat the stuffing out of him yesterday.

"Like I'd want a Dementor's sloppy seconds," it says without missing a beat.

Sirius shrugs off the insult. "If I wanted to, I'd hop up on this table and transform. You look like you could use a golden shower to start the day."

"You can still urinate out of that shriveled and diseased appendage? I thought females of your species were attracted to the larger ones. Is that why you were never able to keep a girlfriend for longer than a week?"

"We should make it an honorary Marauder," I say, spearing a sausage link. "So, how do you all propose I should respond to Riddle?"

The Hat growls. "Send him little Malfoy's head as a reply. Tit for tat and all that horseshit."

"Snape's head would be better, but it has a point," Sirius says. "You have a school full of potential leverage against his followers. Without followers, he's just a powerful wizard."

"I'd rather not involve schoolchildren."

Hat laughs and says, "You're beginning to sound like Dumbledore, HJ. Do you think for a moment Riddle won't use Granger, the Weasleys, or anyone else against you?"

"No, but I'll cross that bridge when I get to it."

Padfoot changes the subject. "Speaking of Dumbledore, he contacted me by Floo last night. Says that he has lined up a special dueling partners for you today and that they'll be here today. Looks like Remus and I get the day off."

“Depends. I hear Dumbledore is looking to sharpen his edge. He hasn’t duelled in awhile. If he comes along, you might get a thrashing that makes what I’ve been doing look like a love tap.”

Minutes later, the wards on the estate activate and inform us that someone has Portkeyed in. We get up to greet our guests.

Imagine my surprise seeing Fleur and Madame Maxime walk into the building. Fleur is busy taking in the sights and treasures in the entranceway, but immediately stops and greets me with a warm embrace.

“We were on our way back from visiting Aimee. She spoke for the first time, today.”

“I’ve missed you.” They are the first words that come to mind, so I go with them.

“Aw, isn’t that sweet. Sirius Black at your service, Miss Delacour.” He bows with a flourish.

“Greetings to you, Mister Black. Harry speaks of you, often,” she says.

“All lies, I assure you. The boy is pathological.”

“Good day to you, Madame.” I greet the half-giantess.

“Albus said he would be joining us shortly.”

“Good. He’s bringing a person for me to practice dueling against.”

“No, your partner is here already. He will come to critique your performance,” she answers, with a large smile. “I must pay my respects to the Lady of the manor and then we will begin Mister Potter.”

Surprised, I consider Olympe Maxime with the eyes of a duelist. JP’s memories of Hagrid suggest that he shares a level of magic resistance with his giant kin. He shrugs off lesser spells with ease

and at least one Death Eater who thought they could bring him down with a single stunner paid the ultimate price. It is safe to assume she shares those attributes as well.

Given the fact that she is also a highly-trained witch, she should be a force to be reckoned with.

As the woman ascends the stairs with powerful strides, Fleur turns to me. “The oaths they took forbid direct training of their students. Your headmaster has agreed to work with me.”

“How good is your Headmistress?”

“No one at my school has ever seen her duel before. I am looking forward to seeing this.”

Dueling Olympe Maxime is every bit as hard as it sounds. The story of the immovable object comes to mind. She has a sharp eye and recognizes most of the minor hexes and jinxes I hurl at her. Where a lesser opponent would dodge, she simply absorbs the spell. Tripping Jinxes, Leg Lockers, Jelly Legs – all entirely useless.

Since she doesn't move much, her counter attacks are delivered with accuracy and power. I've already had to bring up two Mage Shields to ward off her precise attacks and buy time to plan my next strategy.

She shoots a trio of animated ropes at me, seeking a way around my Mage Shield. I Banish them back at her and turn one of them into a wolf. The creature, looking more like a puppy in comparison, leaps at her.

Her hand snatches it out of the air and she snaps its neck with ease, while simultaneously sending an overpowered Bludgeoner at me.

Bloody effing hell! I dive-roll out of the way and come up hurling a pair of Conjunctive Curses. She sidesteps and gives me only a profile as a target. True it's a big profile, but it still makes her a difficult target. Her cutting curse is shielded along with the five minor jinxes she

follows it with. She conjures and engorges five spiders that race across the pit. I incinerate them using my wand like a Muggle flamethrower and turn the flame on my opponent. For the first time she calls up a powerful Mage Shield and the flames splash against it. As she moves with the shield in front of her, I keep up the intensity. I want it hot and humid around her.

Sadly, I can only keep it up for twenty seconds, but I'm guessing things are a little toasty over there. Olympe can and does cast a Cooling charm, but each breath she will be sucking in hot, dry air.

She hurls a mixed bag of nastiness back at me, and I try retreating behind my shield again, but take a jolt of electricity across my leg. I end up crawling behind my shield for protection. I hear the whooping laughter of Black from his 'impartial' referee position. This is both tiring and frustrating. I stand and try high velocity rubber balls to give me some base material for transfiguration. She uses some type of sticky shield that absorbs them like a dartboard. The gooey mass drops to her feet and she transfigures it into a modest gorilla. I blind it instead of killing it. A Banisher flings it away, closer to her than me.

Clutter the battlefield and force her to keep track of more things. A wandering, blinded, and angry gorilla is a problem for both of us, and I've been practicing dueling lately. She's still getting up to speed.

Using my athleticism, I dodge her counter-attack and put my wand to my throat. The Sonorous amplifies my scream into something rather deafening. I follow it up with a burst of light. My spells are only having a limited effect on her, so I'll try a different strategy and take away her senses one at a time.

I can see her blinking rapidly and trying to shake off the effects, so I snap off an Expelliarmus, which hits, but doesn't dislodge her wand—damn it to hell! I conjure like the gates of hell are opening in front of me, and send two animated lengths of chain, a Pettigrew horde, and an eagle in her direction. The gorilla beats on her and she knocks it aside with a smash of her forearm before turning towards my oncoming attack. She Vanishes the chains, but it costs her as dozens of rats scurry onto her dueling leathers and she's forced to use her off

hand to fend away the eagle. Her wand creates a vortex of wind scattering the rats, and driving the eagle up into the sky.

I'm tiring, but I still have to finish her off. I batter her with a pair of heavy Bludgeoners. The first one spins her hard, but she shields the second one. The rats are regrouping and the eagle is on another attack run. She stabs her wand and triggers her own flash of light.

Damn, I wasn't prepared for that! I Mage Shield and try to shake the woolies out of my eyeballs. Seconds later, the pummeling of my shield begins. It is without mercy and I feel my protection starting to give way.

Rolling left, I slap a Dueller's shield on my arm and try to focus. I knock a Stunner out of the air and send darts her way – drippy pincushion time...Hopefully.

Madame Maxime destroys my darts, but I can see fatigue setting in on her as well. Her hair is a mess from the Eagle. A rat screams as her booted foot crushes it. While I was blinded, she killed off the gorilla, the eagle, and all but a couple of rats that she's mostly ignoring.

I need something she hasn't seen before. Maybe Snape's old spell, Levicorpus. It yanks on her feet, but only trips her, while damn near pulling my arm out of my socket. Still, I got her on the ground. I sink a pair of Stunners into her prone form, but a bright light fills my vision. It's too fast to get out of the...

My eyes open and I see Black's face looming above mine. "Wakey, wakey, Harry."

"Damn, I hate losing!"

"Well, technically, it was closer to a draw. She passed out after your second Stunner, but by standard rules, she would have woke up first, so I'm giving the victory to her. Better luck next time, kiddo."

He hauls me to my feet and I walk over to the victor. Seated Indian style, she is almost as tall as I am. She's sipping a flagon of water.

Pasting my 'gracious loser' face on, I salute her. "Thank you for the duel."

She returns my salute. "You duel well, Harry Potter. It could be that I am rusty, but I am more inclined to believe that you are much better than I anticipated, even after Dumbledore's warnings. Luck was on my side today. Had you dodged my last desperate shot, it would have been your win—not mine."

Her words are kind and take some of the sting out of the defeat. "I look forward to our rematch."

"As do I."

The old man is waiting for me as I exit the Dueling Pit. "You did well, Harry. Madame Maxime is a formidable opponent, and you proved yourself her equal. Now, if you'll excuse me. I need to return the favor with Miss Delacour."

I walk over to an anxious-looking Fleur. "Was that you going all out, Harry?"

"Yes."

"Then I am glad that I am not your enemy. I would have pity for Krum, but he deserves what you are going to do to him. Do you have any tips for dueling Albus Dumbledore? I sincerely doubt that I will be able to put on as impressive a performance."

I grab her wrists and kiss each of her cheeks. "For luck, Fleur. He is not very mobile, but his spells are powerful, his shields are quick, and he is even more accurate than your Headmistress. Use your speed and reflexes. Make your spells count. Most importantly, he's a nice old man. He wants you to do well. Use that against him."

Ultimately, Fleur only lasted a little over a minute against him. He is Albus Dumbledore after all. After waking her back up, I watched him duel Fleur, Remus, and Sirius simultaneously. Even beset by age, his

wand-work is graceful and his movements are precise and efficient. The trio tried in vain to find a way through his shields, but failed. Remus and his technical precision fell first. Sirius Black's unleashed fury was like the waves of a storm crashing against the uncaring shoreline before he, too, is trussed up.

I sensed a little bit of fatigue from Dumbledore as he polished off Fleur for the second time.

Afterwards, Dumbledore and Madame Maxime go to spend time with Perenelle Flamel, while Fleur and I inspect the collection of old brooms displayed along the walls of the second floor. Fleur removes one of the newer brooms—well, one from the last forty years—and tests it.

“This one still works, Harry. Would you like to go flying?” She says as she starts pulling her hair up into a bun.

“Sure, let me find one that is still in flying condition.”

“Why not ride behind me?” She offers an invitation.

“Two of us on that ancient relic? It's probably older than both of us put together. I'm supposed to be the one with the death wish.”

“You showed off your dueling skills. Let me show you how well I fly.”

I like her style and follow her to the balcony. The broom is slow by modern standards, but I'm more interested in where my hands are placed as Fleur puts the broom through its paces. The air is crisp, as she leads us over the grounds slaloming over the treetops and getting the most out of this relic with her skills. She is a professional racer for a reason, and I lean on her back and enjoy the ride. Her waist is tiny. It feels like my arms could wrap around her twice.

Passing a waterfall, I pull her out of her tight and compact racers stance, and into an upright position. “Let's stop here for a moment.”

With her hair up, it leaves her neck vulnerable to my kisses. The skin is soft and the loose hairs tickle my nose. She hovers next to a

waterfall and leans backwards into my body while the sound of the water falling next to us fills our ears. The broom slides with her body motion as she makes room for me to move my head over her shoulder and we start kissing.

Her lips are soft and slightly dry from the wind. I moisten them to the best of my ability. My hands roam over the surface of her dueling leathers and she doesn't protest. As my finger pops one of the metal clasps, she stops for a moment and meets my eyes. With a subtle nod, she tells me to continue. The rest of the clasps quickly meet the same fate and I work my hands inside the leathers and feel the thin fabric of her undershirt. Fleur lets out strangled groan when I cup her breasts.

"Take control of the broom and move us back from the fall," she whispers, using one of her hands to guide my left hand down to the grip. She removes one foot at a time from the broom's stirrups and waits as my legs slither across hers and slide into position.

We drop a few feet as I start piloting the broom. Fleur pulls her right leg up and under her chin and then twists on the broom until she is riding side-saddle and the unspoken conversation with our mouths begins anew. It's certainly not my best riding job, but I keep us airborne.

"This is nice. Use both hands to keep the front up, Harry."

It takes me a second to realize that she's talking about the broom. Sadly, it requires that I take my hand off her chest, but I comply. She reaches back with one hand and arches the small of her back like a gymnast making an acrobatic move. With a quick thrust, her hips move forward and Fleur wraps her legs around my waist. I damn near lose my grip on the broom and we nosedive for a second. I get it back under control, and she releases her grip on the shaft. Her arms encircle my shoulders and neck.

I'm the only one left on the broom. Fleur is riding me, slowly grinding her hips against mine, and smothering my neck with kisses. The broom sways with the motions of our body like an extension of our passion.

JP got around in his life—a lot—and he had more than his fair share of erotic encounters. They pale in comparison to Fleur dry humping me fifty feet in the air while groaning into my ear, as I do my best to keep us from crashing.

It makes flying that broom in the first event with a broken leg seem like a walk in the park, but ... Holy shit it's good to be me!

Fleur eases back and rests her forehead against mine while continuing the slow rotation on my pelvis. I nip at her lips until she stops me. Her hands cup my cheeks. "We're staying the night here, Harry, before returning to Hogwarts tomorrow. I have no intention of sleeping in my quarters. We have been too cautious and I want more. Let our relationship be like this broom ride. I don't care if it could end. Right now, I will enjoy the ride to the fullest."

I couldn't have said it better myself.

Many hours later, Fleur and I are comfortably next to each other, naked, and breathing in time. I savor her closeness. This slow dance we've been on for the last few weeks finally ended in something special. Was it worth it? Hell yes! When the clouds in the sky obscured the moonlight, we 'danced' by the soft light of her aura.

"Fleur?"

"Yes, Harry."

"It's time for one last confession. I don't want there to be secrets between us."

She props herself up on an elbow and looks at me. "Go ahead."

The Hat will mock me. I can already hear it saying how easily my tongue loosened the moment she spread her legs, but I tell her anyway. I tell her about the prophecy. I tell her about my memories of

James Potter's life and the reasons I don't behave like a leetle boy. I admit the lie I've lived.

Fleur listens and occasionally runs her fingers through my hair. She doesn't ask any questions and just lets me talk. Her eyes hold no judgment.

As I finish the tale, I look for a reaction and some reassurance. "Well, what do you think?"

She smiles and kisses me. "You being with me matters more than how you got to this moment. Get some rest, Harry. I plan to wake before breakfast and watch the sun come up while we make love again. Tomorrow, our ride continues and you'll need your strength."

Author's Notes – Visit my profile for the latest news on my original works and my fanfics. Thanks for reading. You can expect chapter 23 in 10-14 days.

Disclaimer – Just another fanfic.

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Chapter 23 – Humiliation and Other Diversionary Tactics

“So what do you think it means?” Hermione asks me. “Are you sure that you don’t want to talk about it?”

“I’m more certain that you want me to talk about it. Is there anything else that happened while I was gone?”

She looks miffed. I’m in trouble. “Fine. I received full marks on my Charms and Transfiguration essays. Ron seems to believe that he’ll be starting keeper next year, based on all the work he’s put in. Ginny is thinking about going out for chaser, and is considering breaking up with Michael Corner again.”

I wince in sympathy for the poor Ravenclaw. Ginny “reevaluates” her priorities on a weekly basis.

Hermione continues. “Neville has been absent almost as much as you, and just as secretive about it. Are you giving lessons, Harry? If so, I could use an aura of mystery.”

“Check back after the summer. I’ll see if I can squeeze you in to the next class.”

She rolls her eyes. “Dean is on potions for mononucleosis and so is Lavender—make what you will of that. Considering the thing Seamus had for her, it should be no surprise that he isn’t speaking with Dean right now. Parvati is still smitten with Ron, and I get to hear about it most every night, lucky me. The twins saw Marcus Flint in Hogsmeade and asked him if he’s coming back for a ninth year at Hogwarts. Katie’s been in a funk ever since you started dating Fleur, and Angelina naturally believes it is your fault. There, I think you’re all caught up now. So, let’s talk about you getting a head sent to you in a

box at the French Embassy. I can't believe you're only telling me about it now!"

"Sorry. I had to run off on some errands after it happened." They just happened to be in France.

"I'll bet," she answers while tossing her hair in irritation. "Now, back to the little incident at the embassy, s'il vous plait."

"Trust me, no one else seemed to think it was terribly important. It didn't even make the papers. That's one of the things I've noticed about the adults in this world—not a lot of them care about regular, everyday Muggles. The Head of Security—bugger, even the Auror with me—were both relieved that it wouldn't require as much paperwork because the dead kid was a Muggle."

"That's awful!" She gasps.

"That's just the way it is," I answer. "Take your average pure-blood or half-blood. The most exposure to the Muggle world they get is right here. The farther removed from here, the more they return to their insulated world."

She nods that massive mop of hair. "I'm not saying it doesn't make sense, Harry." She leans in close to me, and looks around to see if she's being watched. She's not; I've erected a Privacy ward out of habit. "This last summer," she whispers, "Mum and Dad took me out to a nice restaurant. I was so used to the food just appearing—oh, this is so embarrassing—I started getting antsy and irritated. I see why they look down on Muggles, Harry, but that doesn't make it right? Don't you see—it actually makes it more wrong! Someone has got to look out for them."

"I'm doing the best I can," I chide her; "I'm a little busy at the moment."

She blushes, "Sorry, I was starting to rant wasn't I? Where were we? Head in a box, I think? What exactly is he trying to say?"

“Dumbledore and I talked about it. Did you know Tom Riddle was a half-blood?” Actually, Dumbledore and James Potter talked about this first, but that’s neither here nor there.

“Really? You should figure out a way to use that against him!”

“I don’t think his Inner Circle cares. He’s from the Gaunt line, and their blood goes all the way back to Slytherin himself. Between his raw magical power and his direct link to a founder, the other half of him could be a fucking troll and they wouldn’t mind.”

My friend grimaces. The faint light of the fireplace dances across her darkened face. “So much for their lofty ideals and blood purity. You know, my dad used to talk about those Godfather movies and how the gangsters would send a person an animal’s head to let them know that they were next. Is he lifting ideas from movies? Do you think that was the message?”

Shrugging, I thump my knuckles on the armrest and say, “I don’t know. Riddle grew up in an orphanage, was bullied, and then became one himself. One of the headmaster’s theories is that Riddle knows how much I was pushed around growing up and this was some kind of peace offering—to feel me out and all that rot. Hell, the first time he revealed himself to me, he tried to barter and say he’d bring my parents back. For what it’s worth, I’m guessing he really wanted to tell me that he knows about my family and the blood protections I have because of them. After all, it doesn’t take a genius to realize that I have something in me that can burn him to ashes. Fortunately, the protection extends to Dudley and Petunia. I’m not so certain about Vernon. He might be a weak link.”

I don’t bother adding how many ways Uncle Vernon could be the weakest link. There might not be a number large enough. A letter from Aunt Petunia arrived via an Order Owl, the only one she’s ever written to Har—to me. She seems to believe I can make ‘these people that are hanging around the neighborhood’ be more discreet.

That went right to the top of my ‘to do’ list. I’ll get right on it!

“Awfully brazen of him, especially if he’s still just a wraith.”

“That’s true, Hermione—although for all we know, he could have his body back already. I don’t think he’s just holed up alone with that traitorous bastard Pettigrew. I think he’s been gathering more allies and resources. Dumbledore agrees.”

“The Malfoys?” she asks.

“A likely place to start as any. It’s either that, or he could be picking some lower-level Death Eaters, to make certain they don’t have an agenda in place, and offering them first chance to be part of the ‘new’ old guard in return for their loyalty.”

“Are you really okay about the head thing? You can talk to me.”

“I’m not a wet-behind-the-ears fourteen-year-old, Hermione. Sure, I didn’t like Piers, and he sure as hell didn’t deserve to get offed like that, but he wasn’t exactly a model citizen, either.”

Hermione stares at me with that penetrating gaze of hers. “You shouldn’t say that.”

“True, but let’s change the subject. Enough about Piers.”

She smiles mischievously. “What do you want to talk about? I noticed that Fleur was gone at the same time you were this week, Harry.”

Ignoring her teasing, I say, “Our paths may have crossed, yes, but I want to talk about the truth and the things I’ve been keeping from you. Here, let me stick a memory in my Pensieve, and we’ll watch it together.” Fleur just shrugged it off, but then again, she never knew me as anyone other than HJ. Hermione and I have a bit more history together. She might not be so accepting of the change in the status quo.

A nervous look crosses her face. “I’m not sure my Occlumency is quite there yet.”

“It’s good enough. The team competition is almost over. You can keep a casual probe out for awhile and the one bastard I really

needed you to keep out, well—he's still in the castle, but just don't look him in the eye."

My wand moves the old basin between the two of us, and I pull out a memory from my mind. I swirl the recollection and see the faint images in the cloudy surface. Her reaction should be amusing enough. "Ladies first."

I follow her down into the memory.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Potter. Are you ready to begin?"

"Harry, you look a bit ... wait, that's not you is it? That's your father!"

"Yes, sir. What would you like to see first?" James Potter twirled his wand, more than ready to demonstrate his skill.

The NEWT Practical Examiner, a chap named Mr. Gordon, pointed to the block of wood on the pedestal and issued his instructions. "Organic to inorganic. Next, inorganic to living—make it...make it a cat. Then take the cat and make it a bird. Turn the bird into a crystal vase. Conjure a flower and put it into the vase. You have ten minutes, Mr. Potter."

James levitates it to the floor and engorges it first. When questioned, he replies that he needs more base material and more room to work with it. He changes the much larger block of wood into a solid slab of granite. The examiner touches it and feels the texture of the stone before motioning at JP to continue.

There's a small grin on my face knowing what's coming next.

JP's wand work is a quick series of swishes that ends in a sweeping flourish as he belts out the enchantment. The granite folds in on itself, gaining shape and size. Four legs and a tail form as the mass stretches and strains into existence. The harsh gray color fades to yellows and browns.

Seconds later a golden-hued lion roars, startling the Ministry examiner.

“Do you need me to make the cat do any tricks?” James asks. He always was a bit of a showoff.

“Goodness, no! Just keep him still and let me look at him. Yes, yes—excellent definition of the muscles. The texture of the fur is well done, though the bristles seem a bit hard and spike-like. You’ll need to focus more on the definition.” The man wisely takes a few steps back before motioning for the Head Boy to continue.

The Lion’s neck distorts and lengthens. The whole body makes an ungainly flop on the floor as the skin goes pale white. The front legs twist in ways that look painful, as a monstrous swan now occupies the space where the lion was only moments before.

Hermione is still gushing about how good my father was when we exit the Pensieve. Finally, she turns to me. “Well, that explains how you’ve become so skilled so quickly. It’s brilliant, really. You’re actually learning magic from your father.”

“There’s a flaw in that argument, Hermione. I’ve only had the Pensieve since January.”

She stops and processes the quandary. I can tell the truth is in circling in her mind, but I know the way her mind works. She’ll dismiss that idea, because it’s too ludicrous. I wonder what that says about me. “So the Headmaster has been lending you his all this time.”

Her tone is more of a question than a statement. “That would be a plausible answer, but it just wouldn’t be the right one.”

“If that’s not it, what is?” she cuts to the chase.

“I didn’t get the memories from Dumbledore. I got them down by the lake last year, when you and I fought the Dementors.”

She puts her hands on her hips and shakes her head at me “That doesn’t make any sense. Dementors don’t give memories, and even if they did, it wouldn’t be those pleasant ones.”

Granger is almost there. I just need to give her one last push. “What did I tell you the Dementors did to me?”

“That they unlocked additional power in you... Wait a bloody second! You didn’t get that memory from Dumbledore, did you?”

“Power can be more than just raw strength. I picked up a talent from Voldemort. I gained something far different from Lily Potter. James left me with something too.”

“How much did he leave you?”

“Everything,” I answer, pointing to a chair. “He and Marlene McKinnon spent hours snogging there. He did it to make Lily jealous. She did it because her boyfriend gave her the boot for someone who was a bit more—shall we say—frisky. Good old Marlene wanted to show him what he was missing. James wasn’t as gifted at Runes as you are, but if you wanted, we could have a serious discussion about the comparative similarities and differences between Norse and Celt. There are memories of his son being born, duels against the real Alastor Moody, fights against Death Eaters, and even the last memory of his death at the hands of Voldemort.”

Stunned, she sits back down on the couch. “Are you still Harry?”

“The Hat calls me HJ for a reason. I’m not James. He was a lefty and went looking for mischief, whereas mischief seems to just find me on its own. I’m a bit more than Harry was as well. He was withdrawn and lacked any real experiences. One thing’s for certain: he wouldn’t know the first thing about what to do with a witch like Fleur. I honestly don’t think he would have survived some of the things the tournament threw me this year. The ‘best’ I was capable of last year wouldn’t have worked.”

Hermione rubs her chin in thought. “James Potter was an Animagus.”

“Remember that Pronghorn everyone was looking for a few months ago?”

“That was you!”

“Another difference. James was a stag.”

“How hard is it to learn?” Leave it to Hermione to find something to study in everything.

“It’s a little harder than Occlumency, but not much. I can point you in the right direction and get you started. It’ll probably take you most of next year, but I’m betting you’ll be able to dazzle your O.W.L examiner.”

“That’d be brilliant!” she exclaims, before adopting a more serious look. “I can see why you didn’t immediately tell me. Oh, and all your diversionary tactics this year... Did it change the way you look at me? Or at Ron?”

I sit down next to her. “A little. I’m probably not as close to Ron as I used to be, but he’s pretty wrapped up in Parvati right now. I’d like to think I’m a bit closer to you. Friendships always change. People drift closer and sometimes apart, but I think you and I are in a good spot right now.”

She swats me on the shoulder good-naturedly and smiles. “Guess we shouldn’t make fun of Flint anymore. You’re in... what? Your eleventh year here?”

A bear circles the room, gauging its enemy, before growling and sprinting towards the large-shadowed figure. Massive arms resist the rush and the two stagger in an awkward semblance of a dance, with the bear rearing on its hind legs and swiping claws at the monster it faces. The enemy is too strong, though, and there is a loud snap indicating that at least one of the bear’s front legs is shattered. The beast is pushed aside.

I reverse the Transfiguration and the bear reverts into a desk in dire need of repairs. “If that had been a troll or a giant, it’d be you thrashing helplessly. You move like a grandmother.”

“Bugger off, you crotchless maggot. I’m doing the best I can!”

I make two wolves out of some chairs and see how well it does with multiple opponents. Almost as an afterthought, I conjure a flight of birds and sent them to harass the Sorting Hat at its weakest point—where Hat meets Golem body.

“Come on, these are just pests. You’re in over your head with just a few puppies.”

With glee, I watch the hat fighting off the birds swirling around it. I probably shouldn’t be enjoying this so much, but I deserve this laugh, and I can’t resist twisting the knife a bit more.

“Do I need to invite Dumbledore’s gargoyle down here to get you properly motivated?”

It launches an ineffective kick at one of the wolves and waves a hand protectively to keep the birds away. “Why don’t you blow your load into Malfoy’s backside and suck it back out, Potter?”

Holy hell! How long had it been saving that one for? “Testy, testy there, Hat. You’ve had all these years imagining what you could do with a body, and now you’re struggling to use it. Give it some time and don’t go picking fights with trolls just yet. How about trying out your upgrades? Black and Lupin were kind enough to make you those gloves. Let’s see them in action.”

Hat speaks the Latin command phrase and both of the Golem's hands explode in flames, immediately driving the birds back and making my wolves wary of approaching. The Golem is every bit as strong as a troll, but painfully slower. Enhancing the punch with fire tilts the advantage back to the Golem. I’ve already made it so the Hat can’t be summoned off of the construct, but it’s missing something.

“Think Dumbledore would let you carry Godric’s sword?” I ask.

It finally kills one of the wolves. “I doubt it. Besides, I want something bigger. Get me something like a Scottish Claymore. I’ll still be able to

handle the bloody sword one-handed, and it will have good enough reach.”

“Planning to delve a bit into good old William Wallace, then?”

“Aye, damn pity he was sold out by the English wizards. Build a school in Scotland and don’t let the natives attend! It’s yet another example of the Founders’ mistakes that’ve been glossed over by history. The good old days! Back then, blood purity meant you were English and not a filthy sub-race like Irish or Scot.”

“I’ll ask Dumbledore if he has something suitable in the armory. Did you ever actually meet Wallace?”

“No. The Founders were too busy kissing up to the crown at the time. Whatever training Wallace received, it came from outside these walls and in his travels abroad. He would have preferred to see this place leveled.”

“Really? Muggle history makes him into a freedom fighter,” I say.

“And magical history labels him an early Dark Lord.” Hat finishes both the last wolf and the contrast between recorded history.

“What will you tell someone a thousand years from now about Harry Potter?”

“If I’m still doing this job a thousand years in the future, I hope someone has the good sense to put me out of my misery. As for you, Potter, I’ll make certain everyone knows about your sexual attraction to animals, poor hygiene, and all your other deviant behaviors.”

I should have known. “That’s comforting. Just make certain not to use goats. I don’t want people confusing me with others.”

“No, you seem more like you’re into sheep, or surrounded by them. Not much difference if you ask me.”

Shrugging, I start walking towards the exit while liberally using mending spells to fix all the damaged furniture. “A crude way of

making your point, Hat, but you might be on to something. Keep practicing with the speed of the Golem. You're getting better, but better might not be good enough when we're fighting Death Eaters."

There's a tension in the air leading up to the next set of duels. Before, everything was somewhat friendly, but now, all of us have had time to nurture a few grudges. Albus would be upset with me if he knew how badly I want to pound Krum into the ground. That arrogant prick is due for his comeuppance and I intend to be the one on the delivering end.

For the moment, I am stuck listening to the another tedious variation of how my replacement Potions Professor knows everyone who has ever been important in some way shape or form throughout the magical world. Hermione is sitting pleasantly talking to Roger Davies, while Melinda Turpin continues to give me that same quizzical look that she's worn ever since she heard that Fleur and I became romantically... entangled.

"Not that you'd need it, my boy, but I know several professional duelers, if you're looking for any last-minute tips." Horace Slughorn makes this offer as his 'Slug Club' begins to break up. James liked the man—to a point. I find that point occurs much sooner in my latest incarnation.

I catch Hermione staring at me and I nod for her to go on and feign interest in what he's babbling about until the rest of the students have left. She leaves, hurrying to catch up to her boyfriend, and I turn to the head of Slytherin and say, "Professor Slughorn, I have the utmost confidence in my dueling skills, but I have a much different question to ask. I'm afraid it's a bit delicate."

"Go ahead, young man."

"I was hoping for any insights you might have into Tom Riddle, whom we both know went on to adopt a different name."

The portly and normally gregarious man's expression darkens. "I'd rather not discuss that topic, Harry. It was part of my arrangement with the Headmaster for coming here."

"But the Headmaster is not the one asking you and I'm not doing his bidding. I ask because twice since his 'defeat,' I've had to fight him as a wraith. I've more than held my own, but I'm looking for an advantage. The first time, he possessed a body and used the blood of unicorns to keep him from death's door. The second time, he'd left a portion of his essence trapped in a diary and again used possession. There will come a reckoning and I intend to finish him—permanently. The Headmaster is a good man...a great man, but the type of solution I'm looking for won't come from him. Snape once boasted that he was capable of creating brews that would stave off death. I'm looking for something that will kill despite the precautions Tom Riddle has taken."

Slughorn draws himself up. "Harry, for both our sakes, I'm going to pretend this conversation never happened."

I nod in reply, "Of course it didn't, sir. But if you happen to stumble across something that might solve this particular problem, and I triumphed as a result, I would make certain the world knew who came to my aid in England's darkest hour. Those kinds of heroics are something the world should never forget."

The briefest of smiles crosses his face, and his pleasant demeanor reappears as if conjured. Lily knew how to play Slughorn, and after they'd graduated, she imparted her secrets to James. Horace Slughorn wanted to be the hero even more than Lockhart. He was just too lazy to go the 'extra mile' old Gilderoy would. But Sluggy wouldn't mind one bit if recognition was delivered on a silver platter. On his own, I doubt he'd ever help me, so I'll give him some incentive. In Slughorn's world, flattery gets you everywhere.

He pats me on the shoulder and seems only half there. He's probably already picturing the glory that could be his. "Off you go now, lad. It's getting late and you need your rest for those duels this weekend."

"I suppose I will start the meeting first," Dumbledore says to the group assembled in his office. I note that there are a couple more bodies here than last time, which is an encouraging sign—Vive La Resistance! Despite being crowded, there is no feeling of claustrophobia. Funny; I've never wondered what enchantments are on this room up until now. He's had decades to shape this office in his image.

I need a place like this.

The Headmaster stands as a young Fawkes perches on his shoulder and softly caws. When the room quiets down, he speaks. "First and foremost, it gives me the greatest of pleasures to reintroduce Alice Longbottom to this esteemed body. The story will be appearing in tomorrow's Daily Prophet, but in these troubling times, any good news is a boon."

He gestures and an animated wheelchair rolls out of his private study. The sight makes me swallow involuntarily. I have very fond memories of the woman in that chair. She is much less disheveled than when I last saw her and considerably more alert. Several in the crowd cheer indicating Albus managed to keep this mostly a secret. He deftly conjures a bouquet of flowers and presents it to her with a sweeping bow.

With a subtle wink in my direction he continues, "Fortune has indeed blessed us with the return of one we thought lost. Let this be a reminder to never give up hope, even in the most dire of situations. Now, dear Alice still has a long road ahead of her before she is fully recovered, but I look forward to the day when she resumes her role with our cause."

Alice's eyes search the room as friends surge forward to greet her. They stop on me for a moment and I give her a smile and dip my head to her.

Finally, she clears her throat and speaks. "It's like a fog has lifted and everything is new again. It's great to be back! I've missed so much and look forward to catching up with all of you in good time. For the

near term, I will be doing my level best to catch up on all the time I've lost with my son and getting my affairs in...well, in order. I'm sorry, that's an awful pun; forgive me."

Several in the room chuckle at her joke as she presses onward. "It strikes me as odd that I was lost just as the last war ended, and now I am found as the next one is about to begin. I will quote my husband's words, in the hopes that he too will return to us in the times ahead. Cling to your friends, cling to your family, and cling to the knowledge that what we do is just, right, and for the betterment of all that walk this land."

That's a bloody good speech! Dumbledore should figure out how to bottle it and serve it when he's out looking for recruits. It's everything that I'd expect from a person carrying the Longbottom name, even if only by marriage.

Dumbledore claps with the rest of us and then raises his voice above the cheers. "Thank you for those inspiring words, my dear. Now, onto the business of the evening. The Giants informed our people in France that they dismissed an unnamed envoy to their clan as part of their adopted stance of neutrality. Naturally, I fully expect they will make a request for more of our gold within the next two months. What is the latest from the Ministry, Alastor?"

"According to my sources, Fudge didn't particularly approve of your speech to the ICW. He would have preferred a message with less focus on the coming darkness and more emphasis on the good things being done now. He's still hedging his bets, but the good news is that the relationship between him and Lucius is still a bit frosty."

"That is probably the best we can hope for at the moment. Sadly, we may have to expose young Harry to more photo opportunities with Cornelius—stiff upper lip, my boy."

I shrug. "I'll do my best to look enthusiastic, sir."

"Of course, Harry. I expect nothing but the best from you. Several of you are providing assistance to the Dursley family, and both Harry and I would like to extend our gratitude for the attention paid to such

a delicate matter. As for the situation around Hogwarts, my sources indicate that some of the students plan on disrupting the festivities after this weekend's duels are complete."

The paintings, the elves, and the ghosts are already paying dividends. Raising my hand, I ask, "By some, you mean the Slytherins?"

"They do seem to hail from that house. It is most unfortunate. The good news is that they know what will happen should they interfere in the duels themselves. I will need several volunteers to be in the audience. They will move quickly to ensure that the students' actions do not become more than a nuisance."

"Why not put a stop to it beforehand?" Someone asks.

"A fair question, deserving a fair answer. I'd rather not tip my hand with respect to my sources. I'd rather save it for something more useful down the road than students releasing fireworks and the like."

After that, I'm treated to a few meaningless nuggets of information on the movements of a roll call of Puceys, Crabbes, Yaxleys, Flints, Parkinsons, Montagues, and Goyles. Other than being rebuffed by Fudge, Malfoy has maintained a somewhat low profile. That is troubling. Too bad I can't sneak some Spyflies into his manor. Maybe I can ask Dobby if he can still get in there. It's doubtful, but the only way I'll know the answer is if I ask.

Dumbledore thanks the members for their work and dismisses everyone. I linger at his request and wait for the others to leave. Penny stops by to tell me that I owe her an interview, but she, too, leaves the room quickly. The room empties and the room somehow senses this and develops a more intimate feel. Finally, there is just Dumbledore, Alice Longbottom, and me.

"Almost the spitting image of James," Alice comments.

"He was taller. I'm just better looking. I'm pleased to meet you," I reply, and draw a laugh from her as I kiss the back of her hand.

“Neville speaks very highly of you. He says how much you’ve helped him this year. For that alone, I am grateful.”

“He’s a good friend and deserves all the help I can give him. You’ll probably have to help him with Hannah Abbott. Honestly, I’ve done all I can.” That’s not really the truth. I could give him more advice, but not the kind that Alice would want me to impart.

Alice lets loose a bemused chuckle. She massages her left hand and replies, “Yes, Hannah...the one person he talks about more than you. I’m looking forward to meeting her.”

“She’s a level-headed witch. Well, as much as any fourteen year-old can be. I think they make a smashing couple.”

Dumbledore interrupts our conversation. “As you are aware, Harry, Alice knows the full contents of the prophecy and everything that entails. Since we are unable and unwilling, when it comes down to it, to quell the story of her recovery, Alice will be recuperating at the Flamel estate in France. That is where she will be working on her special assignment, since it affords her a greater level of protection.”

“Albus, is it wise to speak of this in front of Harry? No offense intended, but I don’t even know what you’ve tasked me with yet.”

“My dear, Harry is not just a member of the Order—we are partners in the running of this war. He defers to my judgment in all things related to the Order, and in turn, I support him in all matters that deal with the prophecy. That is not to say that there is complete harmony. We do have an occasional bit of friction over methods, but I can say without reservation that I am finding our partnership to be most beneficial. Let me assure you, Harry is far more capable than any give him credit for and wise well beyond his years.”

I recognize the suspicious look on her face. She knows there’s more to it. “Very well. What would you have me do?”

Dumbledore pulls out the case containing the nearly empty vial. “Despite what your healers told you, your sudden return does have an explanation. The last dose of Nicholas Flamel’s Elixir was used on

you. This fact is only known to the parties in this room and Remus Lupin, Sirius Black, and Perenelle Flamel, the latter of whom provided it. There are a few drops remaining, along with that which courses through your body. This cure may only be temporary, but we will need your skill with potions to attempt to recreate it.”

“You should have picked Frank!” she predictably fires back.

I speak up to take some of the blame. “We based the choice off of who was better at brewing and analysis, rather than skill with a wand. The Headmaster and I can’t trust the secret of eternal life to just anyone, or we’d have recruited Professor Slughorn. You may very well require more elixir to retain your intellect and you’re the only one that would put your husband’s situation ahead of any temptations someone with access to eternal life might have.”

“Harry is quite correct. I will assist you to the maximum extent possible, as will Perenelle, but I am faced with running this school and the Order, and Perenelle has but a few months left to live. You will have access to the Flamel lab and what notes belonging to Nicolas that we can locate.”

She seems a bit flustered. “But I’m just a bloody Auror and not even a terribly experienced one at that! I’m most certainly not a brewmaster.”

Dumbledore’s answer is calm, if not convincing. “You were one of Professor Slughorn’s best and brightest. Perhaps we can get a Potions Master and craft a tightly worded binding magical oath for his assistance, but for the immediate future, I can only offer you the services of Remus Lupin and Sirius Black.”

Alice snorts and says, “Those two? You’ll likely end up with the Elixir of Complete and Utter Chaos by the time we’re done.”

I stifle a laugh as Dumbledore says, “Obviously, we cannot force you to accept such a difficult task. I will make the necessary arrangements for your son to spend as much time as possible with you. The lad has a keen interest in Herbology and Perenelle’s greenhouses are filled with wonderful specimens from all over the world. Will you accept this challenge?”

“Of course I’ll accept. How could I refuse? Still, I think you’re expecting too much out of me, if you really believe I can pull this off. Plus, I still have a fight on my hands with Augusta.”

Tilting my head, I say, “Augusta and I have already crossed paths and she’s still figuratively licking her wounds. If she becomes too much of a distraction, let me know. When I’m cozying up to Fudge for these photo opportunities, I can probably get a concession or two off of him that’ll make your mother-in-law think twice about how she is approaching things. If I’m stuck being a lovable celebrity, I might as well use my powers for good.”

“Now you sound like your father,” she replies.

“I’ll take that as a compliment. Give my regards to my godfather and Mister Lupin when you see them.” I force myself to say Lupin’s name with a friendly smile on my face. Alice and Frank were the only ones James ever told about that betrayal. I don’t see the need to reveal everything to her at the moment. She has enough on her plate for the time being.

“Tell me, what do you find the most interesting about Harry?” Penny asks Fleur. I suspect the two witches are already plotting against me, but I will show no fear. Fear is weakness. Dumbledore offered up a spare classroom for the interview. He’s probably in on it as well.

Fleur turns to me and arches an eyebrow, assessing me from top to bottom. “Harry is remarkably witty. He can infuriate me one minute and have me smiling the next.”

“And you, Harry? What do you find the most interesting about Fleur?”

“She makes me like the French. No, just kidding. She is the complete witch—brains, beauty, remarkable skill and power.”

Penny smiles and asks her next question. “Now, my readers are going to want to know: when did this all start? It has all the trappings

of a storybook romance and it obviously started long before the two of you went public.”

“For me,” Fleur starts, “I began to respect him as a competitor after the task with the Dementors. He responded with courage and even after he was exhausted, Harry waded into the crowd to help those needing medical assistance. By the Yule Ball, the respect had developed into a friendship, as my dear friend Aimee was...how do you English say it? Trying to play the matchmaker? The rest occurred mostly as we spent more time around each other.”

“Don’t you worry about the age difference?”

Fleur shrugs, and slides her hand into mine while answering, “Age has never mattered to me before. I have dated older, but rarely have they been more mature.”

I take back all those times I thought about sending Fleur one of my famous shit spiders and the fond memories of spying on her topless as Monsieur Pronghorn. Actually, no, I’ll keep the memories—thank you very much!

“And you Harry? When did you first really become attracted to Fleur?”

There were several laps during the broom race where I couldn’t take my eyes off her bum. Nah, that’s probably not the right answer. “I’ll go with our dance at the Yule Ball. Obviously, it’s not hard for a bloke to be attracted to her, but I think that was the first moment I realized that I was really attracted to her.”

“How does it feel to be considered a power couple by the media already?”

“Power couple? I hadn’t heard that expression before. Have you, Fleur?”

She laughs. “My father’s people mentioned something about that the other day. I didn’t think it was humorous enough to tell you, Harry, but the more I think about it, it is rather amusing. The media builds expectations. You mentioned that we are portrayed as a storybook

romance. If that is what you and your readers expect, Miss Clearwater, you may be surprised that we are only intent on meeting our expectations of each other.”

When Penny looks over at me, I point back at my girlfriend with the free hand and say, “See what I mean about brains?”

One nice thing about Fleur is that she isn’t intent on marking her territory, like most of the girls JP dated, or like Katie Bell and Ginny. She carries herself with composure and confidence. It’s easy. Like it’s supposed to be...like it was with James and....

“You still here, Harry? You looked like you Portkeyed away there for a moment.” Penny says. I detect a note of worry in her voice. I’m sure Fleur does as well.

“It wasn’t her aura, if that’s what you’re worried about. I was just thinking that I’m pretty lucky. I went on a few dates with some nice witches before this, but Fleur is my first real girlfriend. If we ever break up, that second girlfriend is going to have a lot to measure up to.”

Penny relaxes, “Oh, I can’t print that. It’ll dash the hopes of hundreds of witches. You’ll be dueling each other again this weekend. Harry had the upper hand last time, but was disqualified. What can the crowd expect? There won’t be any holding back will there?”

I fight back a blush recalling Fleur’s earlier words on the subject. She implied that whoever came out on top, got to pick who would be on top later. Even with her treachery, it’s a win-win proposition any way I look at it! “I don’t plan on holding anything back. I wouldn’t expect anything less from Fleur.”

“Agreed. The duels can be a friendly learning experience.”

Penny nods and then asks, “What about the duels with Viktor Krum?”

“We both beat him last time. I don’t expect him to be much of a problem this time.” I give a nice ‘safe’ answer. My fans probably

wouldn't want to hear that I plan on ruthlessly humiliating him in public.

"Okay, that's enough questions for now. How about a few pictures? A couple for the spread and one for the cover."

The cover shot is Fleur and me on the bench with my head resting on her shoulder. Fleur turns and gives me a quick peck and we break apart as I wink at the camera with a grin. It's all very sweet and innocent.

It's a shame we can't reenact our recent broom ride. That'd definitely get rid of any witches who think they have a shot with me. Still, that's another memory that I'll reserve for just the two of us.

"So, HJ, would you prefer them like this or naked in a mud pit?" Fleur and Athena continue to exchange spells as the ninth task, the second round of dueling, gets underway.

"Tempting, but the mud would only cover Fleur unnecessarily. Both of them have improved. Athena looks like she's trying to make a point," I reply to Hat. With the misfortune that befell Aimee, Cedric doesn't have an opponent in this round, but lucky me... I get Viktor Krum in a few minutes, and then a bye before I face Athena. I can't wait for the thrashing to commence.

"True, the Greek witch should forget about a rematch with you and worry about how much your bed warmer has improved. Delacour is giving her a run for her money."

I tap my wand uselessly against the palm of my hand and see a few sparks drift off the end. I wish I were up there. Fleur does a nice job of chaining together a series of charms and conjurations forcing Athena to ruthlessly shield them. "It could go either way at this stage. Athena is a great technical fighter. She just needs more experience against skilled opponents and she'll be on the dueling circuit soon. That said, Fleur has shown flashes of greatness."

“I’ll bet she has,” Hat answers with a sneer. I ignore the implied innuendo.

The middle of April is a downright gloomy affair in the stadium. At least I don’t have to worry about the sun getting into my eyes, but I am grateful that the rain showers are holding off. I don’t fancy a duel in a raging thunderstorm anymore than last year’s wretched Gryffindor versus Hufflepuff Quidditch match.

After all, that didn’t end very well for me.

Athena dives into her bag of tricks and starts with a flash of light followed by illusions. Fleur isn’t having any of that. She conjures a wee beastie and banishes the scuttling critter down the path separating the two dueling circles.

“Now what’s she going to do with a Firecrab?” Her deft movements enlarge it and I think I’ve sussed it out. Athena’s forced to react to the snapping claws and her illusion shatters. A regular Firecrab gives off a little gout of flame when its shell is cracked; a big one is obviously going to do something on a much grander scale. Fleur sends a cutting curse into her own conjuration, and the beast explodes in a screaming mass of flame.

Well-played by the saucy French witch. The column of flame washes over Manos as she dive rolls to one side and emerges from the fire sheathed in a flame proof aura. I guess it was too much to hope that Athena wasn’t too familiar with Firecrabs.

Manos uses the crab’s husk as a temporary shield, and launches a fierce counterattack. She also goes a bit Dark, mixing in obscure and borderline curses with the more mundane. She follows a pain giver known as “The Rack” with an ankle-level cutter, then a jet of flame, and ends with a colorless fear spell. Fleur dodges and shields with recently-honed skill, but I still grind my teeth together. Manos is walking right up to the line of what could get her disqualified, but has enough restraint not to step over it.

This implies that she also knows the things that do step over that line. Fleur counters with a magical battering ram called “The

Shieldbreaker.” Athena doesn’t bite but throws up a Mage Shield. Stupid move; it would have sapped both of them, and, quite honestly, I think Fleur has more raw power. Instead, Athena dives out of the way of the powerful charm. I don’t recognize the charm Fleur finishes with, but it did something to the circle on Athena’s side. A wet green moss is spreading everywhere and Athena’s footing is a little shaky.

Spikes grow from the Greek witch’s boots, negating the slippery surface. Athena does another flash of light, but uses it to hide her next spell. My viewpoint is from the side, so it doesn’t affect me as much. The blackish-hued curse gets through Fleur’s defenses. My mind replays Athena’s wand motions and I swallow hard.

“Damn!” I exclaim. “That’s an air constrictor. It’ll collapse her lungs unless she knows the counter. It’s dark as hell, but still legal providing Fleur doesn’t die.”

“Are you worried?” Hat asks.

In the last war James watched nervously as Alastor Moody used it on a pair of werewolves in their human forms to try and locate Greyback. Death Eaters used it too. The difference was Alastor applied the counter before they suffocated. Voldemort’s followers usually just let the victim’s die.

I see the panic on Fleur’s face as she starts experiencing breathing difficulties. “No. The victim passes out when they can’t breathe. Athena will apply the counter curse or Flitwick will. If the judge has to, Athena is disqualified. If neither of them acts fast enough, I’ll bloody well do it.”

“Of course, if Fleur were to die, between her parents and you, Potter, Manos wouldn’t make it out of this stadium alive. France and Greece—and possibly England—will go to war.”

“Quite true, but I’m not concerned. Athena’s a pro, but she’s probably got something even darker in store for me.”

In between shielding and dodging. My girlfriend tries some counters, but they aren’t the right ones. Even her bubblehead charm won’t

force enough oxygen into her bloodstream. It'll only buy her an extra minute or so before she passes out.

Naturally, Athena isn't letting up her assault and Fleur starts to stagger. It's almost over. She's probably getting tunnel vision right now. Manos conjures ropes at Fleur's flank that go unnoticed by Fleur. Ropes bind her ankles and she collapses in a heap. Athena summons the wand and the moment it hits the Greek witch's hand she counters the Constrictor.

Flitwick leaves his post and scrambles up to Fleur. He casts a pair of diagnostic charms while giving a rather pointed look of disapproval to Athena. Satisfied that Fleur is in not in danger, the charms professor announces, "The winner is Durmstrang!"

He revives my girlfriend and helps her get to her feet. I can see the look of disappointment on Fleur's normally pleasant face. I step away from Hat and meet her halfway. With no shortage of anger, she hisses in French, "I couldn't figure out the curse in time. It was the damn suffocation curse wasn't it?"

"You're on the right track," I reply in English and try to cheer her up, "It's a Far Eastern curse—Zang's Asphyxiator—and it's illegal in most level one duels, but ..."

She cuts me off, saying, "I know! This isn't a level one duel."

I offer a few words of sympathy. "I'll show you the right counter, but later. If she thinks I don't know it, she's apt to try it on me next round. No sense in tipping my hand. Don't be too upset, you fought well until she went into the Dark Arts. I thought you had her with the Firecrab combination."

"So did I," she mutters. She's too much of a competitor not to be angry. Fleur will just have to sort this out on her own. I know that nothing I say will matter. Truth be told, the fact that she always wants to be the winner and holds herself to such a high standard is a pretty attractive trait and one that I can empathize with.

Several people climb onto the platform and begin mending it for the second round, as Bagman's voice calls our attention to the second dueling platform. Fleur comes out of her funk long enough to lock eyes with me and give me a thin smile and a bob of the head.

"You will beat Viktor," she says. It is not a question, but a command—one I am happy to oblige.

"Into submission and beyond."

A hint of her catty nature returns as she says, "Then what are you waiting for? Just remember to leave some for me. I will have my revenge on him in the next round."

I smile and turn towards my platform. Athena might actually have done Fleur a favor by getting her brassed off.

The Hat pivots his Golem to face me as I pass. "I assume there will be blood and painful screams. I'll be disappointed if there aren't."

Pausing for a moment, I fight the evil grin trying to appear on my face and say, "Just wait and see."

I give the Bulgarian just the slightest dip of my head for a bow that he barely makes the effort to match. The uneasy nature of the crowd fills the air. Most people in the stands might be stupid, but even the most dense of them know this isn't a "friendly."

We both move and launch our first spells the moment the French referee says, "Begin!"

His is a deafening thunderclap that starts a trickle of blood from my left ear. Mine transfigures a chunk of the platform separating us into a clawed hand roughly the size of a troll. The appendage leaps waist level, but Krum blasts it into a cloud of dust.

"Break! Warning Hogwarts! Excessive force and potential lethality!" the judge interrupts with a yell over my throbbing eardrums.

"The fist was closing," I counter. Krum destroyed it before it finished. I had no intention of eviscerating him ... at least in public. The referee is trying to prevent this from getting out of hand. Bully for him.

"Protest noted. Warning stands. Duelers to your marks. Ready! Begin!"

Bastard throws Levicorpus at me. Oh Snape, you arrogant little fuck! You used to hoard your secrets. The Marauders had to steal them from you! Now, you're just giving them away like a cheap slut! I take it just so I can deliver a sledgehammer banisher to his gut. Magic cushions my fall, and I push up and back to my feet, only to see Krum manage to stay in his circle, but he's crouching with his non-wand hand covering his stomach. He spits some blood out of his mouth and looks ready to kill.

Good! I don't want to win this quickly.

He tries a variant of "The Rack" and I swat it away like it's a gnat. With his gut already battered, I try a Tickling Hex and a Slug Spitter to intensify the pain. The Tickler misses, but the Spitter hits. He counters, grimacing, while I shield his infectious cutter. Athena at least had the decorum to wait until after the two minute mark before delving into the Dark Arts. Viktor's already dark by his third spell.

His wand flashes and launches a quick trio of curses. The moment I see the flash starting, I borrow from Athena and cast a mirror image. That split second where neither can see works both ways. His spells come out and two HJs dodge in lockstep. I fake the motions to shield the copy during his next barrage. We step "together" and I shoot a pair of weak, but fast cutters. The first one beats his shield and slices into the meat of his thigh as I step away from the illusion. He cauterizes the wound and brings the glowing wand tip around, sending a fireball in my direction. I hesitate until the last second before raising a shield and stepping through it.

Just as I thought, he's already attacking the illusion!

Krum's second fireball is whistling towards the fake HJ and the idiot is overextended with a maniacal look on his face. It's worth the heat and the slight scorching just to get him in a vulnerable position.

The extra seconds allow me the time I need. My wand moves in a deliberately sloppy manner. This spell is going to be mangled on purpose. The expression on his face is one for the ages as my bolt of Transfigurative magic strikes. Viktor staggers, drops his wand, and straightens, sprouting light brown fur. He topples over as his body lengthens and twists.

Where the "mighty" Krum stood seconds ago, is a half-man, half-donkey. I left the face untouched except for the ears and his wand arm is still useable. It needs to be recognizable for the pictures.

His angry yell comes out more like a bray. That's just icing on the cake. The Krum "thing" lurches over and grabs his wand, which I haven't bothered to summon. I cross my arms and stare at him. He tries to reverse the Transfiguration for a few seconds before giving up and trying to cast spells at me.

The first spell comes out with another braying yell, and it fizzles. He switches to sub-vocalizing, which produces better results, but I swat each of his spells away and snap off a few minor hexes. His flanks are covered in boils and his back legs wobble under the influence of a jelly legs jinx. After that, I halt my attacks.

Deciding to further mock him, I raise a mage shield and turn my back to him. His weak spells falter against my column of energy. The crowd is uncertain whether to cheer or boo. I can't really blame them, but this isn't about pleasing them. It's about paying back Krum for every little cheat he's had over the school year. Making him weak and ineffective in front of a massive crowd will do far more than simply pulverizing Krum.

My eyes drift towards Fleur. I see her approval. After a second or two, she flicks her eyes towards Krum giving me a warning.

Peering over my shoulder, I see the small conjured wolf scampering down the pathway between us. I kill it and turn the carcass into a

horde of fire ants and banish them towards Krum. He'll probably be able to get most of them, but even if only ten bite him, it will be painful.

With that, I turn my back to him for the second time. The Durmstrang section is loudly booing now, using their wands to amplify their jeers. A few more weak spells impact on my shield and then they stop.

"Winner Hogwarts!" The referee declares. Turning, I see Krum has placed his wand in the center of the ring and backed away from it, effectively surrendering. The expression on his face is beyond murderous.

"Monsieur Potter," the judge says, "you will reverse the Transfiguration. Your point has been made." Hermione speaks well of him. Truth be told, I haven't spent enough time in Defense against the Dark Arts this year to really know. He seems fairly competent.

"It's tempting not to and just forfeit the match and let him figure out how to reverse that, but you are correct, sir. I will have to finish the Transfiguration before I undo it."

"I understand. Proceed."

With a few quick movements, Krum finishes his transformation into a common farm animal—maybe I should have gone the route of a pig. Either way, it's finished. I slow down the movement and savor every second of the reversal.

The arched eyebrow of the referee greets me. I shrug and say, "Just making certain I did it correctly."

There's the slightest hint of a smile on the corner of his mouth. The French do know a good insult when they see one.

With that, I step off the dueling platform and walk back to Fleur amidst the cheers and jeers.

"Remind me to never anger you to that point. How long did you plan on letting Krum stand there?" she asks.

“The Transfiguration would have worn off in about five more minutes, and then I was going to change him into a man-pig and let it go on for another five at least.”

The Hat approaches with Hermione and a few others running across the field in my direction. “No blood, Potter?”

“It was tempting, but it didn’t really work in my ‘you are nothing to me’ theme.”

It nods its head slowly. “I approve.”

I notice Fleur’s eyes staring over my shoulder. Her hand is very near her wand. “Is he going to do it?”

“It is crossing his mind, but I do not think so, Harry. A public retaliation would ruin him. He will obviously try to take this out on me or Diggory in our duels.”

“Cedric is a big boy. He can handle himself, and I have complete faith in you Fleur. You’re better than he is, and we both know it.”

The mixed group of students begins arriving. Naturally, Hermione is first with her boyfriend trailing her. “Harry, that was amazing and cruel at the same time! I’m not entirely sure what to say.”

“It was a long time coming and if anyone deserves it, it was him.”

She seems to accept my rationale, and I look at the rapidly approaching gaggle of Gryffindors. Right as everyone surrounds me, I hear something.

“Moriturus et cruda!”

A painful shock shoots up and down my right arm as I spin towards the source ... Roger?

I don’t even process the blank look on his face as I wandlessly banish him, knocking him about ten feet backwards. My arm is throbbing in

pain. It's a dark curse that will cause my arm to decay, bleed, and eventually become useless—unless reversed. What in the bloody hell!

Neville, who was walking up with Hannah, tackles Davies as the Head Boy tries to stand. Ron pounces on him seconds later and kicks the wand away. They pin him and Abbott drops a body bind on the struggling wizard.

The yells from the stands and even more people running in my direction can mean only one thing—chaos rears its ugly head. Fleur's wand is out and she's already scanning for threats. Aghast, Hermione stares at the leather sleeve covering my arm. The curse has already opened some wounds and I can feel the blood seeping down my skin.

Hey, it wouldn't be a Triwizard task unless someone took a cheap shot at me.

"I can't treat this in the tent," Poppy declares. "Let's go back to the infirmary. I have to consult St. Mungo's for treatment options."

She motions for me to stand and we walk past the Aurors surrounding Roger Davies. Dumbledore is examining him and listening to his answers. Roger giggles like a little boy and points his empty wand hand at me and shouts the curse again.

"He seems to be under the influence of the Imperius curse." The Headmaster looks in my direction and then at Lupin. "Go with Harry back to the castle. Keep a watchful eye on things."

Karkaroff speaks up, "What do we do about the next round of duels? Potter was not scheduled for an opponent."

Dumbledore pauses and glances at Madame Maxime before saying, "Yes, you're right Igor. Announce to the crowd that there will be a brief delay, but the second round will start shortly. We'll move the third round to after lunch and see if Harry can continue."

The Headmaster motions for us to leave and we exit the tent. The nearest people cheer and I raise my good arm and acknowledge them, while processing the list of suspects in my head. Hermione starts over, but I wave her away and jerk my thumb in the direction of the castle. There's a distinctly hostile vibe coming from both the Durmstrang and Slytherin sections.

"Do you need me to float you, Harry?" Lupin asks.

"No, it's just my arm. The replenishing draught is taking care of the blood loss and I have a numbing charm on it for the moment. Now we have to figure out who did it."

The werewolf looks at me as we start up the path towards the castle following the swift and determined steps of Madame Pomfrey. "What does your gut say?"

"Snape, then maybe Karkaroff. What about you?"

"If it was Durmstrang-related, wouldn't they have tried to attack you before the duel? We'll be able to use the Map to see the people your attacker met with."

"You've got a point, although this might be retaliation for what I did to Krum." Naturally, I worry that this might go a bit higher than those two.

"You were rather Marauder-like in your handling of the boy," he says.

"Like I told Hermione, he's been earning it all year. It was time for him to cash in. I put up with his shit all year and it was long overdue."

"This isn't a leisurely walk!" Madame Pomfrey scolds us.

Moony and I share a shrug and a smile as we hurry along. It almost feels like old times.

In the courtyard to Hogwarts, I hear the sounds of fireworks and other noisemakers going off. Remus sighs, "It appears the troublemakers Albus was concerned with have started early."

“The question is, how out of control will it get?”

I don't get to wonder much more on that topic, because Poppy stops next to the fountain and stands still like a statue. Her eyes are locked forward and unblinking, even when Remus clicks his fingers in front of her face. Something seems really off.

Lupin says, “I've got a bad feeling about this.”

“I think we just walked into a trap. Look sharp, Moony.”

I draw my wand with my left hand as four black cloaked figures drop their disillusionment charms and step out from behind the pillars. Their ivory masks look at me impassively.

“Well,” I say sliding into a left-handed fighting stance, “are we going to do this?”

“Such impatience, young child,” a voice says. The owner steps into view. He doesn't bother with the mask. His moves are carefree and he walks between the Death Eaters and spreads his hands in a mock show of grandeur.

“Hello, Harry Potter. It's time to rectify history's mistake. Your death is long overdue.” The words are delivered with a thin smile. He looks like Marcus Flint. He sounds like Marcus Flint. The only problem is, when I look at him, my scar hurts.

Author's Notes – Many people have asked about a Graveyard battle scene. Did you really think HJ would fall for some kind of convoluted scheme like that? Stay tuned for the exciting conclusion of this story coming next week. It's already written and going through editing at this time. There will be a sequel, but it won't start until late this year, while I finish Inner Eye and Turn Me Loose.

Chapter 24 will be released on the day that Dead Eye: Pennies for the Ferryman goes on sale. You can go to my personal website and read the preview for that story – right now!

I'll be at ConCarolinas next weekend on May 30th and 31st for those of you in the Charlotte area.

Disclaimer – All good things must come to an end. So it is with this fanfic.

Acknowledgements – Thank you all for coming along for the ride. Thanks to all those who edited the chapters of this story. Thanks to all that offered suggestions. Thanks to all that reviewed.

Chapter 24 – Cry Havoc

“Kill the werewolf! The boy is mine!” The Dark Lord possessing Marcus Flint’s body screams.

I’m already in motion. A swish of my wand scoops gallons of water from the fountain. Voldemort leaps out of the way. The water crystallizes into a jagged spear of ice catches the far left Death eater in the side as he’s trying to cast something.

“Avada Kedavra!” I scamper out of the way of Riddle’s killing curse and it slams into a pillar with a shattering crack. The sounds of other spells fill the air. I can’t spare a look to see how Lupin is doing – I’ve got all I can handle in front of me. At least I know why my wand arm was deliberately attacked.

“Tonare!” My blasting curse passes harmlessly beyond him and digs a chunk out of the steps. I keep dodging and animate the fountainhead. It turns into a stone claw and leaps for him. He pivots and vaporizes it, never taking his eyes off mine. Instead of ropes, I shoot twin strands of barbed wire.

His butchering curse rips through the wire and digs into my useless arm. Flint’s crazed voice rises above the din. “That’s it! Bleed Potter! Bleed!”

He’s only as powerful as Flint! Even with his skill, I can wear him down. I subvocalize a pair of bludgeoners and a bone breaker. The second bludgeoner wings him and unfortunately knocks him out of the way of the breaker. If I had my druthers, I’d rather the third spell hit. But that forces his counter to go wide right.

There's a thrust of Legilimency. I brush it off and don't bother with eye contact. It's his wand I'm focusing on right now. The sounds of battle tell me that Remus is overmatched by the three remaining Death Eaters.

"Here boy, catch this!" Voldemort banishes the frozen healer at me and sends a nasty curse directly behind her. I try to shield her, but my angle is off. The spell hits, blackening her skin on the left side of her face.

A whipping motion of my wand and I raise a wall from the ground to protect her. I follow through and vanish the length of animated chain he hurls at me. That's when he starts a series of patently unrecognizable shit coming my way. I have no doubt that everything is Dark as all get out.

I move – as fast as I can, but it's not enough. A hand made completely of fire explodes from the ground tripping me and searing my ankle. With a scream, I roll and send a jet of acid in his general direction. My right hand leaves a bloody print on the stone and it catches my attention.

My blood! It can hurt him. It can really hurt him. I ignore his pack of conjured mongrels and banish the bloody stone right at him. He casually tries to magically repel it, but it flies straight through his efforts and slams into his gut. The look of surprise alone is priceless.

Using my blood as a weapon is rather inventive. The only problem is that the blood has to be on the outside of my body. Understandably, I'm reluctant to part with too much of it.

"Lucius! Your assistance! Now!" Flint barks. That at least identifies one of the participants. My firewhip slices through four of the six dogs. The other two leap past my slashes. I wandlessly banish both and vivisect them in time to avoid Malfoy's killing curse whizzing by my head so close my body practically vibrates with death magic.

My whip drives him backwards forcing Malfoy to dodge. I can't fight the two of them at the same time! Voldemort is back on his feet, probably with some rib damage, and just in time for me to unload on

him. He has no choice but to shield it. The blasting curse impacts on his mage shield and there's a strange pull on my entire body.

Something definitely weird is happening.

Our wands seem to lock and a tendril of energy links the two. That's right! Dumbledore mentioned this in one of our conversations. Both wands have the same core. A cage of light envelopes the two of us and I can hear Fawkes' song. Malfoy tries a curse, but it rebounds off the surface. The energy is closest to Riddle. I spare a glance at Remus and see him staring at us.

That look is frozen on his face as a killing curse strikes him. The Death Eater that struck him down pulls off the mask – Severus Snape with his face twisted in demented rage. The death of my friend costs me as the force connecting Voldemort rushes in my direction.

Fierce determination makes it stop. I'm locked in a contest of willpower with a demented madman. My hatred of Riddle, Malfoy, and Snape boils through my veins and that pushes me onward. I will have my revenge! He will fail!

Snape stalks towards the cage and tries to send a Cruciatus Curse at me. I feel a muted sensation of pain, but surprisingly, so does Voldemort.

"Snape! Release your spell!" He bellows. Flint must not have my tolerance for pain. The bead of force continues its march towards the body of Marcus Flint. Our eyes lock and he tries to force his way into my mind. My defenses thwart him for a moment, but he gets a glimpse of something before I break contact. Whatever it was, it startled him and the link is almost at his wand.

The third Death Eater removes his mask–Wormtail. "Hello again, Harry. You should just give up. There's no way you can win. Just drop your wand ... I'll make sure it's painless ... I owe you that much."

Malfoy, Snape, and Pettigrew circle me hurling insults, but my focus is on making that pile of energy get ever closer to Riddle.

Malfoy scoops Poppy up. Her entire face is crawling with that curse. "Drop your wand, or the bitch dies right now!"

"I should think not, Lucius!" Another voice interrupts. It's Dumbledore. Fawkes flies over our cage as the Supreme Mugwump brandishes his wand. I can practically feel Riddle's desperation. He spots the injured Poppy and then the deceased Remus Lupin. Even through the cage, his anger is tangible.

"Surprise, surprise, Riddle! I'm not the pushover you thought I was, and your little trap isn't working." I play on Peter's words, "You should just give up. I'll make sure it's painful."

"Never!"

Snape, Malfoy, and Pettigrew are collectively getting whipped by Dumbledore. Pettigrew lasts maybe ten seconds before he is trussed up by ropes, frozen out of his Animagus form, and glued to one of the pillars. The Headmaster advances on the two remaining opponents and addresses his former employee, "I am most disappointed in you, Severus. There was a time you begged for my help. There will be no mercy this time."

The greasy bastard sends a barrage of Dark curses at my ally as Fawkes bolsters my efforts and the energy reaches the tip of Riddle's wand. It vibrates and seems to be fighting his two-handed grip. The air crackles with magic. What happens now? Does it explode?

Tiny jets of light fire out the sides of the wand, traces of the spells he has cast in this duel and before. One of them hits the ground and assumes a phantom human shape. The phantom swoops around me, whispering in my ear. "Said he was a wizard and then he killed me. You fix him, boy!"

When the second form appears, it's a female – not Lily. "My name's Bertha Jorkins, from the Ministry. He killed me in Albania. Tell my family, at least they'll know and can move on with their lives."

“I will,” I promise. I leave off the assumption that I live through this. Riddle’s screams intensify.

As each spell strikes the ground, my anxiety builds. Will it go back that far? Is the answer to my existence about to appear? Will a baby Harry Potter appear? Lily? James?

I hear several killing curses in a row and from the midst of them step a woman with a beauty that defies even death. Swallowing hard, I watch the specter of Lily Potter approach me – no Harry, no James.

“Hello,” I croak. She’s as beautiful as I remember. Other ghosts including Dorcas Meadows appear, but I ignore them. Lily Potter fills my vision.

“I’m not really Lily’s ghost. I’m just a shadow, Harry – residue of the foulest of magics. There’s no cause to be frightened.” Lily looks over and sees Lupin’s crumpled form. Sadness crosses her face before she returns her gaze to mine.

Whispering, I ask, “What am I?”

She tilts her head and smiles, “All my hopes, all my dreams, the two men that matter the most to me in one package. I never meant to hurt either of you ... forgive me. Be strong. Be brave. We’ll distract him for a moment and you can break the connection. Take that chance to run.”

“The hell I will!”

Lily looks over shoulder one last time. “Somehow, I knew you’d say that. In that case, avenge me and live a long and happy life.”

The half-dozen specters assembled rush towards Voldemort. His wand clatters to the stones as he tries to protect himself from their clawed attacks. The connection between us fades and I’m already in motion. I finish slicing through the blood-soaked leathers on my right arm and banish it at him. My wand work Transfigures it into a rope that flies through the fading spirits. He sees it as his wand is being

summoned back to his hand. The rope wraps around his neck like a huge bullwhip and his face explodes into flames.

Flint's limbs flail uselessly and he collapses in a heap, consumed by the ancient blood magic. The wraith emerges, jettisoning the useless teenager like so much rubbish. It starts towards me in anger, but Fawkes blocks his way, screeching what must be the phoenix equivalent of, "I don't think so!"

It rushes away with Fawkes clawing at it as I spin looking for more foes, only to find the blazing eyes of Albus Dumbledore regarding me.

"Well done, Harry." Snape and Malfoy are pinned to the ground before him by an invisible force – unable to move.

"Not well enough," I gesture to Remus before dragging myself to Poppy. She's in bad shape.

"This is a nasty curse." Her face is completely black and puss boils leaking greenish fluid. "I'll start a counter curse chant. It won't be enough, but maybe it can stabilize her until we can get her to St. Mungo's."

"What's going on here?" Karkaroff demands dismounting from a broom.

I immediately train my wand on him. "Leave the wand where it is, Death Eater."

He holds his hands in supplication. "I had nothing to do with this."

Dumbledore assesses the man. "Then you must prove it, Igor. Your knowledge of Dark Curses is formidable. Assist Harry with Madame Pomfrey."

The tall, thin man strides over to me, "I am going to do a diagnostic, Potter. Continue your chant."

After a few motions of his wand, he declares, "The fifteen minute plague. How long has she been afflicted?"

"Maybe five minutes." I answer.

"Dumbledore, you must summon your familiar to transport her to St. Mungo's. There isn't much time!"

The Headmaster closes his eyes and seconds later a slightly bedraggled version of Fawkes appears. The bird must have been giving Wraithmort a sound thrashing. I attach a note detailing the curse to Poppy's robes and Fawkes grabs her and disappears.

I sigh and take a moment to feel the exhaustion setting in.

Dumbledore is beside us, "When Fawkes returns, you need to go to St. Mungo's as well for the curse on your arm."

"I'll manage." I respond as the Headmaster stands and starts walking in the direction of Peter.

"Yes, I'm certain you would, but the sooner this gets looked at the better. Now, for our dear friend Mr. Pettigrew..."

"Avada Kedavra!" The words below in my ear as Karkaroff used the distraction. The bolt of green energy strikes Dumbledore in his side, as he turns back. The spell was too close for even someone with the Headmaster's reflexes. His body collapses and the light is gone from his eyes. One of the greatest wizards ever is gone in the span of seconds! I don't have much time to process it, because Dumbledore's assassin, that son of a bitch, uses his other hand to pin my wand arm to the ground.

"So dies the great fool! Now for his apprentice!" He starts to bring his wand up, but my diseased limb is quicker. I jam my bloody palm into his face and amplify it with a wandless banisher that sends him rocketing backwards. I bring my wand up to finish the bastard, but the freed Malfoy shields him.

"Not so fast, Potter!" The silver-maned man says. Both he and Snape are up and armed. I can see Snape hesitating.

Karkaroff pushes himself back up and blocks my next attack. "Snape! Get out of here! Take Dumbledore's body to the Master! Your debt to the boy makes you a liability. Malfoy, don't attack until Snape is gone."

I throw a blasting curse trying to goad them into a fight as the greasy bastard runs for the old man. I shoot a curse at Snape, but the chickenshit blocks it. Karkaroff raises a stone wall between me and Snape to protect his bloody backside! Seconds later the Halfblood prince is flying away on Karkaroff's broom, carrying a small doll that must be Dumbledore's shrunken body.

"I will take great pleasure killing you, whelp!"

"You act like you beat Dumbledore in a duel. You didn't. On the other hand, I did just beat your pathetic Lord Voldemort."

Good keep talking. The longer this takes the greater chance more people are going to show up. Time's on my side.

"Be careful, Igor. I'll free Pettigrew and the three of us will take him."

"No, Pettigrew may owe Potter as well. Severus wasn't certain. Only the power of the Master could suppress those debts. Either way, grow a spine you sniveling maggot!"

It's actually somewhat refreshing hearing Karkaroff speak to Malfoy in that manner. They argue and I get inspiration. I roll to the Death Eater I skewered at the onset and shove my wand into his Dark Mark. "Morsmorde!"

"Did I do that? The clock's ticking gentlemen, for you at least." I say diving out of the way of Malfoy's blasting curse as Karkaroff works to dispel the Dark Mark. It doesn't matter what kind of distraction they've engineered over in the stadium. The Aurors aren't going to ignore this. Death Eater parts splatter everywhere. Makes me wonder if there's anything left to identify.

Coming out of my roll, I assume a dueler's stance and launch my opening salvo, a bonebreaker, followed swiftly by a laceration curse known affectionately as "The Butcher's Delight."

"Odds are, the two of you will be dead before anyone gets here," I say offhandedly to goad them to rashness.

Even with my left hand, the powerful curses slam into Karkaroff's shield. It might be enough to make him wish he had more than just Lucius Malfoy as back up. For the record, I am Harry James Potter!

He curses in Bulgarian and sends his spells along with Malfoy's, forcing me to take cover behind the shattered remains of the fountain. I come up conjuring steel discs instead of the rubber ones I use for training. My focus brings them into existence with razor sharp edges. My aim is wild, but one burying itself into a pillar a few feet from the head of Lucius is enough to give him pause.

Malfoy responds by transfiguring the pillar into a grizzly. His wand gestures send it racing towards me while Karkaroff tries to pin me down with a series of cutting and explosive curses. The rest of the fountain becomes another animated claw that digs its hand deep into the side of the rushing bear.

I grunt under the power expenditure, but use the hand to whip it around and fling it back at them. Malfoy staggers out of the way and I wing him with a cutter that opens a nice gash on his right side. A mage shield that's too slow lets Karkaroff's bludgeoners through and I'm knocked back at the pillars. I jab my wand over my shoulder and use a cushioning charm. Karkaroff and Malfoy both send blasting curses, trying to drop the pillars supporting the stonework, but my rebound sends me rolling back into the courtyard and out of harms way as the masonry kicks up a dust storm.

Pulling deep within myself for the power I need, I hurl a few of the larger slabs of rubble at them, crushing the skull of the recovering bear. With the sounds of its death scream, I dig further and create a vortex of rubble and direct the cyclone at Malfoy. Igor quicksteps to his left firing spells at me forcing me to dodge, but I keep it bearing down on Malfoy.

I whirl and dance out of the path of Karkaroff's curses as my maelstrom bears down on the other Death Eater. Reflexes, honed by hours of training and dueling come to me like second nature—there's no time for thought, only actions.

Lucius sends curse that passes through it harmlessly. In desperation he tries to disenchant it. Someone really should remind him who has the "Power the Dark Lord knows not." The stones shred his flesh and toss him like a child's plaything.

He makes no move to get up. And then there was one.

Between all this and the duel with Krum, I've used so much magic in the last twenty minutes that I'm literally shaking. The pain in my cursed arm defies description. I feel like I'm running on empty. Even so, I turn to the relatively uninjured Igor Karkaroff, eyes blazing, and brush the dust off of me. He's had free reign for the last decade to practice the Dark Arts to his heart's content. He's the Headmaster of one of Europe's leading schools of magic. He obviously believes he can kill me.

None of that means a damn thing! There's a hint of fear in his eyes. That fear makes me his master.

"You killed Albus Dumbledore. You're not getting out of here alive."

He unleashes his most vile spells: the Killing Curse, the Cruciatus Curse, bone crushers, and the like. I dodge and shield my way through it, triggering a flash of light to throw his aim off. He struggles with my counterattack, raising a mage shield.

Karkaroff's shields buckle under my relentless assault. He tries to respond and seize the initiative, but I keep pounding away, leaving him reeling against an onslaught. The creatures he tries to Transfigure are destroyed before they're fully realized. Foul curses fail to find their mark and his fear continues to grow.

“You’re nothing but a boy!” He screams, mostly to convince himself, while vaporizing the ice spear that nearly skewers him. I barely notice his ravings and just keep advancing on him firing spell after spell.

I am Igor Karkaroff’s judge.

Karkaroff strays close to Lupin’s body and I animate my deceased friend, treating him like a statue or any other inanimate object. My actions are slightly revolting, but I’ll worry about that after I’ve killed Karkaroff.

The Death Eater spins to see the body leaping at him. His banisher dies on his lips when Lupin bowls into him and begins grappling. The Durmstrang Headmaster manages to roll the animated werewolf off of him, but the moment I release the magic controlling Remus, I land a bone shatterer that turns his forearm into a bloody useless hunk of meat. He screams in pain. A quick disarming charm sends his wand spinning away from the flailing hand.

“It’s over you miserable bastard!”

I am Igor Karkaroff’s jury.

He spits at me, “I’ve survived your prison before, Potter. I will again.”

“Do I look like an Auror? Maybe you didn’t understand me when I said you’re not getting out of here alive. You murdered Albus Dumbledore.”

His eyes open wide as he finally realizes what’s going to happen next. The last words he ever hears as my cutter removes his head are, “He will be avenged.”

I am Igor Karkaroff’s executioner.

A spell fired from behind me goes well over my head. I hear a gurgling scream as I spin to face this attacker.

The Sorting Hat is holding Lucius Malfoy in the air by the head with one of the golem's three-fingered hands. The Death Eater flails for a moment and tries to bring his wand around at the hat.

It clenches the fist and there's the sickening sound that reminds me of Dudley, a sledgehammer, and an overripe pumpkin. Malfoy's legs stop kicking and dangle uselessly. There's a drizzle of bile swirling around at the back of my throat, but I savor the taste. It won't balance the loss of Dumbledore or Lupin, but I'll take what I can get.

"I still need to work on not overdoing things," Hat comments like it just killed another conjured cat instead of a human. "I'd have liked to have heard that scream for a few seconds more."

"Thanks for the help. I'm impressed that Malfoy could even get up. That's quite a grip you have there, Hat. What took you so long?"

The Hat lets the body drop and glances down at the bloody mess as it flexes the hand. "I left as soon as that bloody bird came for Dumbledore! This body isn't built for speed. Wash this off. I don't want it to stain." Hat's gaze turns to Pettigrew, still stuck to the column where Dumbledore left him. "Looks like someone finally invented a better mousetrap."

After a second it sees I'm not laughing. "What's wrong, HJ?"

"Dumbledore's dead. Karkaroff killed him."

Hat pauses shaking the open hand of the golem and watching the bits of Malfoy's brain drip off. I found the one thing that leaves it at a loss for words. Finally it says, "Which of us kills Pettigrew?"

"Harry," Peter whines, "Please, have mercy."

"No. We don't get to kill him, yet. Peter's going to tell us where to find Voldemort. Then he's going to clear Black's name. What happens after that is anyone's guess." Mercy is in short supply at the moment. It's time for some answers.

“Stay still, Mr. Potter.” The healer orders me.

The courtyard is still a mess and chaos reigns supreme. Three Aurors are keeping the students back. After entirely too much time, Scrimgeour receives his vial of Veritaserum from the Ministry to use on Peter. Somebody probably had to file a damn authorization form or something.

“We’re wasting time!” I growl. Already, forty-five minutes have passed and my tolerance for Britain’s Aurors is at an all time low. I could cut them some slack, it’s not every day Scrimgeour finds out that Dumbledore is dead, Death Eaters are killing people, and Lord Voldemort may be performing a ritual to get a new body any second now.

Then again, I’m not feeling particularly charitable right now.

“If you want to keep the arm and use it anytime soon, you’ll let me finish.”

I cast an eavesdropping charm, so I can hear the conversation between the Aurors and Peter.

“Are you Peter Pettigrew?”

“Yes.”

“Are you a Death Eater?”

“Yes.”

“Is He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named alive?”

Peter smiles, “I am not sure.”

I shout, “Ask him if he knows where the blasted resurrection ceremony is supposed to take place!”

That draws angry looks from Scrimgeour and his cohorts, but he asks while another cancels my charm.

I stare at the Healer. "Done yet?"

"No."

I stand from the conjured stool. "Keep working. We're walking."

"You will sit back down!"

"Listen! I've killed three Death Eaters today. I will damn well hear what that bastard says and I'm in no fucking mood for your bullshit. Do you get me?"

The Healer silently follows as I walk over to the Aurors.

"You're not authorized to be here, boy. Don't make me remove you." Scrimgeour gives me some of his surliness.

I ignore him and say, "Pettigrew, were you really the Potter's secret keeper instead of Sirius Black?"

"Yes."

I turn to Scrimgeour. "There, he's party to the death of my parents. As the last remaining and thus the head of the great and noble house of Potter, I stay. Did he say where the ceremony is going to take place?"

"No, he's fighting the serum and only offering yes and no answers."

Looking into Peter's face, I say, "Feel like squaring that debt you owe me, you filthy traitor."

He sneers and mocks me, "If I told you, Harry, you might get hurt. I don't want that to happen."

"Mister Scrimgeour, do you have a Legilimens on hand?"

“Sorry Potter, without a Wizengamot order, I can’t do that without Minister Fudge’s authorization.”

“Sir in the interests of expediency, why don’t you and your officers step over there for a minute or two?”

The Head of Law Enforcement looks at me for a moment and makes his decision. “Givens, go help with crowd control. Crawley, you and I will take a moment and positively identify the bodies. I want that location in five minutes, Potter.”

I shoo away the stunned healer and stare a nervous Pettigrew in his eyes and say, “I’m better with Occlumency, but you’re a pretty weak-minded person, so it’s a wash. This can hurt a little, or a lot. It’s really up to you, Wormtail.”

He tries to close his eyes, but I spell them open. I whisper, “Legilimens.”

Getting into someone’s mind isn’t as easy as it sounds. Experienced defenders can try and fool, distract, or eject you. That’s where I excel. The sad truth is that I’m nowhere near Dumbledore’s level, or even Snape’s when it comes to breaking in. When a duelist learns the mind arts, it’s more about watching the other’s eyes for the slightest hint of what they are doing while masking your own intentions. There’s a more passive element to it.

Here, I’m trying to rummage around in his thoughts like an untrained burglar on his first attempt.

I’m getting images. First I see Peter, a guy who looks like Flint’s father, and Flint and using the passage from the Shrieking Shack to come out at the Whomping Willow where they’re met by Snape and Malfoy. I push back further. I see Peter meeting with Karkaroff and Snape on the ship—interesting, but too far.

Then I see a cauldron, a graveyard, and a massive looking snake ... named ... Nagini. A decrepit old house overlooks the cemetery. This is the spot! I feel Wormtail fighting me as I search for the name and location of this place. Like a bull mastiff, I lock my mental jowls

around that memory and start shaking until the traitorous piece of filth gives me the answer.

Our little tug of war ends a minute later when I discover – the Riddle House in Little Hangleton.

I verify that the Veritaserum is still working. “Peter, is the ceremony taking place at the Ministry of Magic?”

“No.”

“Is it taking place in a graveyard in Little Hangleton?”

“Yes.”

“Scrimgeour! Got it. How soon can we move?”

“We aren’t going anywhere, Potter. I’ll head to the address and investigate as soon as my reinforcements and the Minister arrive.”

“What?” I can’t ruddy well believe this fool. “He probably doesn’t have a body yet. If we stand around here with our hands in our pockets, he will.”

“I have no intentions of walking into a trap against someone who can go head to head against Dumbledore.” Scrimgeour walks away with his tail between his legs.

I’m tempted to summon their map and make my own bloody Portkey, but reality and exhaustion keep me from making that bold act. The replenishing draught still hasn’t taken effect, and I could go running headlong into a fight against his entire Inner Circle—minus a few blokes—and Voldemort, for the second time today.

I shout after him, “Give me five Aurors and I’ll go right now!”

“No.”

“Coward!” Probably not the most persuasive word in my vocabulary, but I’m not exactly in the mood to deal with bureaucrats unwilling to

risk their hindquarters. I turn back to Pettigrew. "Does Voldemort have Death Eaters at Little Hangleton?"

Peter replies, "Yes." I can see him searching for something that will get him out of answering.

"How many? More than five?"

Pettigrew bites the front third of his tongue off and spits a mouth full of blood at me. I dodge away in anger and frustration? Fuck! The sniveling bastard actually found a way to beat truth serum!

The skittish healer comes back and starts working on my arm again. After a minute, he looks up at my face and gets a puzzled expression on his face. He says, "Did the Death Eater get blood on you?"

"What? No, I got out of the way. Why?"

"Your forehead has blood on it," he answers.

With my left index finger, I trace my curse scar and it stings. The scar is split open and oozing blood. Peter sees it and starts laughing, foaming blood and spittle drip from the corners of his mouth.

There's a sinking feeling in my stomach and I want to vomit. We're too late—Voldemort lives again. The healer cleans the wound and is flustered when he can't close it. Eventually, he simply covers it with a bandage and a timed sticking charm. Another ten minutes pass while Fudge gets briefed and Scrimgeour gets his dozen Aurors together. I barter the location for the right to go with them.

The sun has broken through the ominous clouds as we arrive in Little Hangleton. It seems out of place that such foul magic would be performed in broad daylight. It takes a few minutes to locate the graveyard and Obliviate some Muggles, but in short order, we find ourselves cautiously approaching the graveyard.

Fudge tries to comfort me, "Now, if there's any trouble, young man, stay close to me and the Aurors. Mr. Shacklebolt will see to your personal protection."

I spare a glance at the broad-shouldered Auror and reply, "If I'm right, he'll still be weakened from the ritual and not ready for a fight. This will be the best time to hit him. If there is any trouble, your men will need to stay out of my way."

In the end, the point is moot. I was right, we waited too long. All that's left waiting for us is a cooling cauldron filled with a foul concoction, the defiled grave of Tom Riddle, Senior, and the most disgusting sight I've ever laid eyes upon.

With the midday sun glinting off his glasses, I see Albus Dumbledore's body, held in the arms of an animated statue in a mock crucifixion. He is naked, pale, and stripped of his dignity. They split him from throat to crotch and drained his blood into the cauldron.

"Merlin's ghost!" Fudge exclaims. "Someone, get him down!"

As one of the Auror's approaches, Dumbledore's head jerks up. In a voice that sounds more like Voldemort's, it says, "So much for the only one I've ever feared! Tell Potter that I'll be coming for him soon enough. Enjoy your final days, boy!"

It breaks off into a cackle and falls silent after a moment and the Auror causes the statue to drop him like so much rubbish.

I push the man aside and hiss at him, "Show some damn respect!" I step past the useless fool and struggle against the tears in my eyes. My wand mends the wound on the dead body and moments later I conjure a cloak to wrap around him.

He was Albus Dumbledore! He deserves better than this!

A fireball explodes above me and I immediately raise my wand ready to attack. It's Fawkes, hovering in the air and quietly crooning an incredibly sad song. There's a very pregnant pause and I think it is

saying goodbye to Dumbledore. A minute later it circles above his body and lands on my shoulder.

Scrimgeour finally pulls his head out of his arse and orders the Aurors to search the house on the hill and the surrounding area.

I float Dumbledore's body so that I can get my arms under him. Magic makes the corpse light and manageable. "Take us back to Hogwarts, Fawkes. He belongs there."

Fawkes jumps off my shoulder and hovers by my side. It pulls Voldemort's wand from where I'd stashed it in my belt. It holds the yew and phoenix feather in its beak for a moment before there's a crack. Nimble claws catch the two pieces and it drops one in each hand of the statue. It then disappears leaving me curious. Within moments, the house on the hill is burning. The fire is spreading rapidly, very rapidly.

Riddle is going to need all the help he can get. I'm not sure which of us he needs to worry about more. Fawkes is probably angrier than I am and I certainly wouldn't want an immortal phoenix as an enemy.

Fawkes reappears and lets out a squawk before landing on me, again. A blink of the eye later and we're back in the courtyard. With most of the Aurors at the graveyard, only the teachers are left to maintain order. Naturally, that means that the courtyard is full of students looking at the damage. Our appearance is understandably sobering and a startled silence descends on the crowd as I walk with tears streaming down the sides of my face through the remnants of the battle in the direction of the stairs. The silence is broken by the strangled cry of Minerva McGonagall, who drops to one knee, abandoning her trademark composure.

The Hat meets me at the steps. "I'll take him to his office, Potter. Come up when you're ready. The gargoyle will be told what will happen to it if it tries to stop you."

"Thanks."

Fawkes trills at it and leaps onto the golem's body. The Hat pauses to say, "I suppose I'll have to put up with you and Potter together, now."

The two ascend the steps and I bow my head. When I raise it, I find Fleur standing next to me. She says nothing and gathers me into her arms. I let her lead me into the castle, away from the crowd, while I fight the urge to scream. I'll share my grief with her, but not the rest.

I'll fight a war for them. I'll save them if I can. But I don't have to do it with a damn smile on my face!

Sitting at Dumbledore's desk, I tap my wand against the Triwizard Trophy—in reality; it's just an empty cup. Eternal glory? Yeah, right. My cursed arm rests in a sling. Even with the help of a phoenix, it'll be weeks before it's right again.

I will get better in time. Others will never have that luxury.

It's no surprise to anyone that with two of the judges dead, one by my hand, there is no one interested in the rest of the duels or even the tenth and final task. What remained of the competition committee announced their decision at dinner and declared me the winner to the subdued applause of those who haven't already been taken off the grounds by their frightened parents.

Hurray for me. To the victor go the spoils.

Instead of the customary week after exams to decompress and prepare for the summer, the train is leaving at the beginning of May and students taking their OWL and NEWT exams will be brought to the Ministry. I stood next to Fudge while he announced that there is no intention to close Hogwarts and that everyone should expect the school to reopen next year. He disingenuously declares this is only a "bump in the road."

Fudge doesn't know how to fight a war. He looks more Chamberlin than Churchill in his demeanor. The older generation believed their lies that the darkness was gone, never to return – and now they're

flopping and twitching like a fish out of water. A fat lot of useless, frightened church mice!

My price for playing show pony at Fudge's press conference—Sirius Black is a free man with his name cleared.

Sirius makes the funeral arrangements for Remus. I'm torn how I feel about Lupin. There was no resolution between the two of us – no chance to say that it no longer matters. Water under the bridge doesn't matter if the bridge has collapsed into the river.

Sighing, I push the cup away from me and focus on things that unfortunately require my attention. Moody's calling a meeting of the Order later today. He's already staking his claim as the next leader. I'll probably have to put him in his place at some point. Alastor Moody, skilled fighter? Yes. Nice to have his wand at your side? Definitely. Leader? No. Borderline psychopath? Very much so.

Aberforth stopped by and collected his brother's remains in preparation for the funeral. His only comment was, "I swore an oath after our sister died that I'd spit on his grave. Over the years, I kinda hoped that I'd go first, so I wouldn't have to go through with it."

The aging phoenix waddles across the desk and tugs at my sleeve.

"What is it Fawkes?"

It paces over to the corner of the desk. There must be something in there for me. I pull the top drawer open. Instead of Dumbledore's playbook to beating a Dark Lord, there is only a small paper bag. Fawkes drags the bag onto the table and spills the contents—dried peppers of some kind. Greedily, it starts chomping on them.

Crestfallen, I say, "Oh, sorry. I didn't know you're hungry."

In the empty space where the bag was, I notice a small book—not much more than a pamphlet. I pick it up and see that it's a handwritten affair in Dumbledore's writing. The title brings a smile to my face.

Ten Things You Must Do When Caring for Fawkes and Six You Absolutely Must Not!

Inside, there is a dedication.

Harry, you'll forgive me if I hope you're an old man when you first see this book, but even I cannot be that much of an optimist. The ten things will make your partnership with Fawkes run smoothly and the six are things I've discovered through much trial and error. I would recommend that you add to both lists for the benefit of those who will follow you. In this and in all other things, I hope you learn from my successes and my failures.

Long life and prosperity to you,

Albus

Smiling in spite of myself, I realize that Hagrid was right all those times when he'd say, "Great man that Albus Dumbledore."

I look at the list. The first thing on the Must Nots stands out. Though Fawkes loves dried habaneros, never let it have more than five in a single sitting. You will most assuredly regret the smell that inevitably comes later. Don't say that I never warned you.

Only then, do I see that the bird has already polished off half the bag. "Bloody hell!"

"This changes everything," Hermione says quietly, sitting on my left as Minerva fights her way through her eulogy. She turned down the job on the continent to stay and ensure Dumbledore's legacy continues. I'm not certain Fawkes chose the most loyal of Albus' supporters. Minerva outclasses me by leaps and bounds.

I squeeze Fleur's hand and smile at her before turning to my best friend and saying, "This was always my war. I'd hoped to have his help. His brother says that Dumbledore sat for a painting a few years

ago, but no one seems to know where it is. Hopefully, we can find it at some point. It won't be the same, but it will be something."

"I'll help," Granger answers with her trademark determination.

"If I thought I could stop you, I would. It's going to be dangerous."

"I'm a big girl."

"It would probably be more effective if you weren't crying at this moment."

"You should see yourself, Potter." She whispers, dabbing her eyes with a tissue. "You're a bloody mess, and you have to speak."

Either the universe bows to the will of Hermione Granger, or she is a tool of the universe, because the moment she utters that Minerva ends her emotional effort and says, "... and now, Harry Potter would like to say a few words."

I release Fleur's hand and stand up from the front row, surveying the dignitaries, the herd of centaurs, representatives of Gringotts, and the students from Beauxbatons and Hogwarts. Somehow, the Durmstrang contingent felt uneasy about staying for the ceremony and sailed their half-repaired ship home. With the exception of Athena, good riddance to the lot of them, especially Krum. I pass McGonagall on my way to the podium and squeeze her arm gently. "He would want us to be strong ... for the students."

She nods, "Yes that is precisely what he would say. I keep telling myself that, but it sounds much better when you say it. He was very proud of you."

I'd hoped for a "changing of the guard" over alcohol and jokes, while the two of us reminisced about how easily we'd dispatched Riddle. Instead, my time is now, far sooner than either of us would have liked. If his spirit is somewhere listening, then I hope my words do him justice. He once told James that, "Words that come from the heart have a magic unto themselves."

Gripping the sides of the podium I say, "The last thing Albus Dumbledore said to me, before he was cruelly cut down, was that I needed to get to St. Mungo's for treatment of my injuries. That was after he made certain that Madame Pomfrey was safely on her way."

Stopping, I smile at Poppy in the second row. She's weak and has lost considerable weight. I threatened to put her under my care in the infirmary if she didn't take it easy. It was kind of refreshing. Draco Malfoy was nowhere to be found. According to the Marauder's Map, both he and Peter Yaxley left the school grounds and haven't been seen or heard from since. They were the likely suspects for the Imperius curse on Poppy.

"That says all you need to know about Albus Dumbledore. He put his students and his staff ahead of himself at every turn. That is how much he cared! He loved this school. He lived and breathed this school. Ultimately, he died for this school. When the four founders built Hogwarts, I'm sure he was what they had in mind as a headmaster. With a wand in his hand there were few that could match his skill and power. Even the so called Dark Lord, who is really just a man named Tom Riddle, was reluctant to face Albus Dumbledore in combat. In the end he wasn't bested with a wand, even by three opponents. No, it was base trickery—a curse from behind from a man Dumbledore welcomed into this school with open arms as an equal, an assassin's blow from a craven coward."

I pause to clear my throat, "Albus Dumbledore represented the best attributes of the houses of Hogwarts, the traits we should all attempt to emulate. He was a courageous man willing to battle when necessary and show restraint as well. He was intelligent and possessed a keen wit most would envy. He was a cunning man, able to navigate the world of politics both here in England and abroad. He checked his ambition with a sense of responsibility to the greater good. Albus Dumbledore was well passed the age where most go off and enjoy retirement. His work ethic would impress Helga herself. And loyalty? Just look around; he believed in equality for all, whether you were Muggleborn, Pureblood, Werewolf, Goblin, or Centaur."

I don't mention that it is unfortunate that he looked too hard for the goodness in Snape. It's a nice change, Sirius free and sitting there in

broad daylight and Snape forced into hiding. His days are numbered and Padfoot and I are the ones doing the counting.

“The Headmaster’s beliefs weren’t conjured-on-the-spot platitudes. You knew he meant every word that he said. Dumbledore’s word was as certain as the money in Gringotts, as definite as the stars in the sky, and as enduring as the castle I’m looking at right now. That is what Albus Dumbledore stood for. If he were here right now, he would encourage all of us to realize our potential. He would say to look for greatness, not in the amount of money in our vaults and not in the spell books we have on our shelves. No, he would smile and say that true greatness comes only from within; it is measured not in power, but in lasting friendships and good deeds. He would challenge us to find the greatness that lives within each of us. That is the currency our Headmaster most coveted, and that is why his departure leaves the world a poorer place.”

I turn and salute the mausoleum where he now rests. I will find that greatness in myself. You may not necessarily agree with how I intend to fight this war, but I will do all that I am capable of to rid this world of Tom Riddle.

“Mistress Maxime is looking for all her students!” Dobby shrieks after popping into my workshop where I’d had a bed installed. Minerva said that I could keep the room until she decided she needed it for something. I thank the elf for the interruption and dismiss him.

Fleur sighs and looks at her clothing on the floor, “Were it up to my father, I would already be back in France. The Headmistress fought him to stay until the day after the funeral. I am afraid, our time is up.”

She starts to rise, but I pull her back to me. Call me greedy, but I like as much of my flesh as possible in contact with her.

“Harry, you know I must leave. You’re not making this any easier.”

“I don’t want you getting accustomed to leaving me.”

Fleur mutters a few nasty words in French while she wiggles her delectable derriere in just the right spot. The wiggling goes on for several seconds.

“Not that I’m complaining, but what’s this all about?” I ask as she keeps going.

“Well, I could try to leave right now. You would argue. I would cave and we would have sex again. Let’s skip ahead to the sex. This way we both get what we want and the Headmistress does not have to wait longer than necessary. It’s simpler that way.”

There is no argument for that logic. We maneuver into a much more comfortable position, “I’ll try to make some of your races, but I’ll be on the move this summer. I may end up using a bit of polyjuice as well.”

She laughs, “It is odd. Some of my former lovers would use that very line, but it would have a decidedly different meaning.”

“A bit of a faux pas to be talking about previous lovers and polyjuice. It doesn’t really help the mood,” I comment while picking up the pace.

She uses her hands on my rear to slow me and says, “And that is why I simply adore you, Harry. Those others, if I asked them to use polyjuice would do as I asked. Even now, like this, you scold me.”

“Well if that’s what you like, flip over and I’ll give you a proper spanking.”

Fleur laughs, “Perhaps another time, Harry. We will use those mirrors your godfather made to rendezvous over the summer. You have already seen how flexible I can be. Let us play things by ear.”

“I’ve spoken by Floo to Lady Flamel. She was going to leave her estate to Albus. Now, she’s giving it to me to use as a base against Riddle.”

She frowns, “I don’t think my father will like you waging war from France.”

“Technically, Louis the Thirteenth and Cardinal Richelieu granted the Flamel estate indefinite autonomy. It is a country unto itself like the Muggle kingdom of Monaco. I may have to remind your Ministry of that particular treaty.”

Fleur reaches up and runs her fingers through my hair. “You are going to give my parents no end of trouble. They are so used to people catering to their whims and seeking their favor. Hurry up and dispose of this Tom Riddle, so that you can pursue your life’s true calling.”

“And what might that be?” I ask playfully, part of me worrying that what she says next might propel our relationship along too fast. If she says she’s in love with me, I know I’ll say it back, but I don’t know if I’m ready to say it out loud ... not yet. My life has been one big lie. She’s a truth, an unmovable, unshakeable truth ... the one truth I know I’d be willing to die for.

Grinning, she says, “Providing me with entertainment and companionship.”

“I’ll get right on it.” I’m relieved that she’s still keeping it lighthearted.

“Not just yet, you are in the middle of something.”

“Oh, right you are. As you command, milady.”

Epilogue

I let them wait for a minute and take a slightly perverse pleasure in having them stand there, paralyzed, frozen in the pitch blackness of the cave and listening to the rustlings in the dark. The Marauders could be bullies and my memories provide me with a unique perspective of being on both sides of the argument. So far, Fawkes hasn’t objected. Who knows where an immortal firebird draws the line?

Lighting my wand, I keep it dim and smile. It's a delight to see their eyes bulge in fright, but they haven't seen anything yet. I'd practiced this holier than thou over the top speech, but it sounded like the kind of thing Riddle and Snape would do, so I'm not going there. "Okay, everyone's awake. Look, we really don't have much time. I'm keeping a group from their meal. You know who I am, and I sure as hell know who you are."

I walk in front of the man and roll the sleeve back on his pajamas revealing the Dark Mark beneath it. "Mister Greengrass, that's an interesting Dark Mark you have there. It matches your wife's quite nicely. May I call you Dominic? Blink once for yes, twice for no. Good. There's no reason this has to get nasty. Tonight's discussion is just for us. Your half-breed master doesn't need to know. He'd just get angry and try to take it out on you."

Moving to the lady, I conjuring a robe, and wrap it around her. "Anika Greengrass, sorry, you'll forgive me for transporting your family to this location on such short notice. Assuming you return to your house, you'll find that none of your expensive wards have been tripped. That means we can have this discussion again any time I find it necessary."

I can see the eyes darting around searching the shapes in the darkness for the noises that they hear as I move to the two young witches. Dumbledore wouldn't approve, but the children of Death Eaters are impressionable, and I want to make certain they know the consequence of joining Riddle's organization.

"Hello Astoria. Just finished your second year didn't you? Don't worry. I'm just having some words with your parents. This will be over in just a few minutes."

She responds to my words with terrified rapid eye movement as I drape another conjured robe around the goose-fleshed girl. Continuing on, I stand in front of my classmate. There definitely isn't a Dark Mark on her. For the record, there isn't much clothing either. I've seen better and, assuming Fawkes is up for a trip back across the channel, I'll see it again tonight. Still, the view is certainly nice and deserving of a compliment.

“Hello Daphne, hope you’ve been well in the few weeks since school abruptly closed. Those Hogwarts robes really don’t do you justice at all. Here, I should really cover you up and not be rude.”

I leave that robe suspiciously open in the front. If she goes to bed in only a warming charm and some panties, who am I to pass judgment?

Pausing, I let those words sink in. “I know that your master has returned, even if Fudge is trying to play this off on Snape, Malfoy, and Karkaroff. My allies and I will find him, and this time he’s going to stay dead.”

Turning up the light on my wand, I let them see where we are. I give everyone a moment to adjust their eyes. Close by are five cows, magically paralyzed just like the Greengrass family. They aren’t what’s really frightening them.

The dozens of Arcomantulas lining the walls are. They range in size from the width of a human hand all the way up to the size of the cows. The Sorting Hat stands in the center of the room affecting an air of disinterest. Dominating the back of the room is a mass of eyes and terror that once tried to kill me.

“I know many places like this – terrible places that I only go to because I have to. Many of your fellow mask-wearing friends have already been to some of those other places. The only reason you’re not already dead is you seem like reasonable people. Reasonable people know when the tide starts turning and know when to walk away.”

Tears are streaming down Daphne’s face. I use my finger and brush them away. “Oh don’t worry, we’re all friends here. Plus, I’m the good guy, remember? Good guys always give the bad guys a warning. You and your sister aren’t the bad guys, yet. I’m hoping it never comes to that.”

Pivoting, I walk back to the parents. “You two however, appear to be the bad guys – branded like cattle. So this is the one warning you get.

I am not Dumbledore. My side will not fight your master like Dumbledore did. This war will be different than the last one. If people suddenly start disappearing again, it will happen to both sides!”

In the extended version of my monologue, I would have gloated about Fawkes burning the Malfoy estate to the ground while Narcissa and I had a chat about the location of her spawn. She didn't lie, but the boy was already gone. I'll catch up to him soon enough. Lady Malfoy and I happened to be on the shores of Azkaban at the time of our chat, and without her wand she only had little old me for protection. On the other hand, I could tell them about the milk in the Parkinson's chillbox that someone tainted with the Draught of Living Death. Riddle isn't the only one who understands how intimidation and terror can be used as a weapon. I just happen to be getting in touch with my Inner Marauder and giving it free reign to teach certain people the error of their ways.

I motion to Aragog and the clicking begins again. The two adults each feel the weight of an Arcomantula climbing up their backs while two others position themselves in front of the girls.

“Now for tonight's demonstration – these cows could be you or virtually any other Death Eater. Let's watch what happens to our test subjects.”

The spiders on the Death Eater's backs use them as springboards as I release the cows from paralysis. Several of the other arachnids join in as the cows flounder and scream. The fifth one is quickly immobilized and dragged to Aragog and his mate. They lean forward and begin dining on the poor creature. I'm happy that I ate lightly tonight.

Turning back to the parents, I sigh. “I trust that I've made my point perfectly clear. My allies and I don't have an axe to grind with you, and I don't like bringing people here, but I will if that's what it takes.”

Reaching into my pocket I pull out a slip of paper. “Now for some good news! Albus Dumbledore used to say that people always deserve a second chance and the choices we make are important. On this piece of paper is a secret and I am its secretkeeper. There is

a house in London that is under Fidelius. If you should ever fear for your life and decide to flee from his service, that house will be a sanctuary for you and your children. Should he demand that your daughters join his service you can send them there, and on my honor as the Head of House Potter, I will protect them regardless of whether you come with them or not.”

I hold it in front of their eyes so they can read it.

A safe haven for Death Eaters unwilling to serve their festering pile of semen gargling afterbirth of a master has been opened at #12 Grimmauld Place in London. Accommodations are somewhat creepy, customer service is downright awful, and rent is one galleon per day per family, payable to the Sirius Black sexual favors fund at Gringotts.

“This is an option if you suddenly decide that this war isn't for you. I hope our next meeting is under more pleasant circumstances. So, here's what happens now, I'm going to stun all of you and the next time you wake up it will be back in your beds. Get some rest and think about what we talked about tonight.”

Only after I knock them out do I summon Fawkes to take them back. No need to tell my enemy how I bypassed their wards without tripping them. Dobby should have finished installing the box of spyflies in the master bedroom and in the rafters above their Floo connection by now. The pillow talk Dominic and his wife have over the next several nights should be worth listening to. I am left with the Hat and the disturbing suckling sounds of the giant spider clan enjoying a late night snack. Motioning for the Hat to follow, we exit Aragog's domain.

“I still could have done the monologue. It would have been great.”

It actually sighs and says, “I heard it and you sounded like a condescending prick pretending to be a minor league villain.”

“Everyone's a critic. Sirius liked it.”

With a skeptical laugh, Hat counters, “Black can turn into an animal capable of licking his own balls. Consider that before you ask his opinion on anything. You made your point and cowed them, excuse

the pun. Maybe the next time they're killing Muggles, they only kill two instead of twenty."

Kicking some dirt and limbs, I wait for the Phoenix to return. "Dumbledore wouldn't do what I just did."

"Yes, the old man wouldn't have approved. Godric would have. Salazar definitely would have. Rowena would have."

"Helga?"

"No, but she was a dumb bitch that the other three tricked into doing all the things they didn't want to do themselves. Her legendary work ethic meant that the other three enjoyed life more."

"I didn't want to fight this war. I was okay with having to off Riddle, but let Dumbledore do all the leading," I say as much to myself as to my companion.

"So what are you going to do, HJ?"

I look into the darkness as we wait for Fawkes to return. "I'll fight it the only way I know how – like a Marauder."

Author's Notes – There you have it. Hopefully I've given you something that you'll like better than the original. Yes, I am planning a sequel, but not until the end of the year or the beginning of next year. In the "real world," my first full length novel has just been released! Visit my profile if you are interested in acquiring. If you're really interested, I'll be in Charlotte, NC this weekend at ConCarolinas for the launch. Next up, I'll be putting out the chapters of The Inner Eye of Harry Potter and then the final chapters of Turn Me Loose.